

On the Move- Conquering the Aging Myth by Kay Van Norman

What have you given up that you used to love to do? I'm standing on stage in a skimpy leotard, fishnet stockings and heels, seconds from performing a *Fosse* dance piece (think the movie *Chicago*) with eight other dancers age 17-24. Oh..... I'm a 48 year old professional woman, wife and mother of two.

In my 20's & 30's I was a professional dancer teaching jazz, tap and social dance, and performing with and co-directing a university dance company. Mid 30's I began directing an exercise program for senior citizens, continued to dance with the company as time allowed, and became a mom. A published book, national and international speaking engagements and a full time career as a senior wellness consultant, speaker, and writer followed. My life's focus remained on physical activity but evolved into talking about it a lot and doing it enough to appear "in shape". A husband, two children and a career allowed so little time for dancing that adding "and dancer" to "I'm a consultant", when asked was the only stretching I ever did.

And somewhere I crossed that invisible line.... the one compelling people to add "for your age" onto otherwise welcome compliments. At age 44 I missed dancing and with a now-or-never urgency decided to dance in a company concert. Padding my resolve (apologetically) with jokes like "*I'm going to keep dancing until the audience starts chanting –get that old broad off stage*", I leaped into it.

Quite frankly I failed. I learned the dances and went through the motions. It felt foreign. I struggled, hung on, injured myself on dress rehearsal night and couldn't perform. Relief equaling disappointment I began the internal grieving process, reluctantly considering that I couldn't be a dancer.....at my age. "I'm a consultant".

The Aging Myth

That would have ended the story except my professional career led to exploring the impact negative attitudes, social values and norms, and media stereotypes towards aging had on physical activity expectations and behaviors of mature adults.

Although over a decade of research proves inactivity, not aging causes functional loss, accusations linking age with decline are relentless. Greeting cards bemoan aging, black balloons come at 40 (used to be 50), family, friends, acquaintances and strangers blame their recent injury, increased weight, or reduced performance on age. Television and movies portray caricatures of aging extremes; frail seniors, cute and feisty or doddering and dependent, doomed to the rule of decline, or ageless seniors like Jack LaLanne or Hollywood elite who (with healthy banks of time and/or money) defy aging and clearly represent the *exceptions* to the rule.

Print media is imbedded with powerful language confirming the myth. An author writing about intergenerational issues ponders, "I wonder if I will be able to ask a nice young person for help *when* I need it" (not *if* I need it). An author making an upbeat, positive case for aging as a journey bringing wisdom, accomplishment and security also laments about the hard parts; "*Getting sick. Getting smaller. All the pills. Parting. Everything goes. You don't recognize yourself*". Subtle or direct it's all offered as a forgone conclusion that if you live to an advanced age you will be ill, unless you are one of the elite exceptions.

What does that have to do with me standing on a stage in fishnets stockings and high heels? Everything!! Because I realized I had fallen victim to aging stereotypes, negative belief systems and expectations about aging. Me! Even with advanced education and experience in the field of health and fitness and my reluctance to give up a dancer's

image! You see I know, *absolutely*, that physical declines attributed to aging are misplaced, owing instead almost entirely to physical inactivity. Yet, at the first signs of my own physical decline I succumbed to years of negative programming, feeling that without heroic investments of time (Jack LaLanne) or money (Cher) I couldn't continue to be a dancer... at my age.

De-programming

I decided to de-program myself and practice my beliefs by committing to choreograph and perform for a university dance concert. This time I approached it like a work project and determined the resources I would need to be successful; strength, flexibility, balance, a good friend to confide my mission, and time. I replaced my morning cup of tea and newspaper with a twenty minute Pilates video, added more stretching to my twice weekly cardio and strength training sessions and made time for dance rehearsals twice per week.

My resolve was tested when I had to choose between attending a professional conference or dancing. I missed the conference. It was tested again;

- when I doubted my ability to choreograph a dance by myself but couldn't find a co-choreographer,
- when I couldn't find dancers to perform in my piece (I used to be legend in the studio...well...everyone knew me because I taught the classes) but these young dancers had never heard of me and were dubious of my skills,
- when my knee started to hurt,
- when I started to feel anxious about performing (I had been one of the best dancers -- would I be average--could I stomach average—did I even want to be good “for my age”)

I had to make a conscious effort almost every day to over-ride aging stereotypes and negative self talk.

“My knee hurts maybe I should stop.”

“Well my knee hurt when I was a young dancer and off and on through the years when I wasn't dancing” Advil, ice, stretch, strengthen, better warm-up.

“I probably shouldn't use that move, I don't want to hurt myself.”

“Do I have the strength, flexibility and balance I need to perform the move? “If so, get with it, if not what can I do to gain them?”

The months passed and I begin to feel more like I belonged in the studio. I regained body confidence, found joy in movement again. I eventually found a co-choreographer and dancers willing to take a chance. When I regressed to the attitude of doing well enough “not to embarrass myself” my friend Toby challenged my thinking then drove seven hours to be here the week of the show. Curtain up, lights up, music, friends, husband and kids in the audience – go Mom! And I was good, the piece was good, the experience was life affirming.

What About You?

You're 50, keep forgetting where you put your keys and are told you're having “senior moments”; *start worrying about Alzheimer's*. Pull a muscle while playing a favorite sport and conclude you're getting “too old” to play competitively; *reduce activity accordingly*. Have a birthday and receive a barrage of rude messages reinforcing negative stereotypes of aging.

Contrast that with a 12 year old who regularly forgets his homework even after being reminded twice in 15 minutes, and children or young adults who pull muscles, break bones and become sore from activity. No-one suggests an evaluation for memory impairment or giving up physical activity. A birthday card I found with a bunny on the front wrinkling its nose, stating inside “*I smell old people*”, would immediately be recognized as highly offensive if the word “old” was replaced with a word describing any ethnic or religious group. It’s time to recognize ageism as equally offensive.

For one week consider tracking how many negative references you observe (or offer yourself) linking aging to decline. Have you made your world smaller by accepting the aging myth? People don’t lose function because they age, but age is often accompanied by diminished activity, watching rather than doing. When was the last time you jumped on a trampoline, did a cartwheel, climbed on the monkey bars, or moved vigorously just for the fun of it? Does your activity level place you at risk for losing important elements of physical vitality; strength, endurance, flexibility, balance and coordination? Will you be more or less capable of physical challenges one year from now than you are today?

Listen to your self talk about aging and decline. Stop to consider the value you place on physical and mental vitality and be honest about what you are doing to retain vitality. Then make a *conscious* choice whether to accept or reject the aging myth.

I started out wanting to “make one last good showing”. Now I know I can dance as long as I choose to give myself the resources necessary to be successful. “I’m a consultant and a dancer”. What have you given up that you used to love to do?

SIDEBAR: Fast facts

- **Inactivity** results in losses of strength, flexibility, endurance, coordination & balance
- Average strength losses of 1-1 ½% per year result in losses of:
 - 30% by age 60
 - 45% by age 70
 - 60% by age 80
- These losses result in difficulty walking, rising from chairs and performing other activities of daily living. They are preventable and even reversible with physical training, at any age.