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I USED TO BE A DANCER

Connecting the Past and Present Versions of Yourself

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What have you given up that you used to love to do?

Eleven years ago, I learned that understanding ageism intellectually isn't the same as knowing something to the core of your being. I'm sharing my story to illustrate ways that deeply embedded aging expectations can bubble to the surface when faced with challenges — even for “believers.”

I used to be a dancer

In my 20s and 30s, I taught dance and codirected and performed with a university dance company. In my 30s, I directed an exercise program for adults 55-plus, danced when time allowed and became a mom. Then a published book, speaking engagements and a career as a wellness consultant left so little time for dancing that the tagline “and a dancer” added to introductions was the only stretching I ever did!

Eventually, I uttered “I used to be a dancer” in place of the tagline and felt immediate pain as my kinship with strength, grace and joyful movement fractured. So, at age 48, with a “now-or-never” urgency, I leaped into a local dance performance. The problem was my mind lagged behind.

The aging myth

As a healthy aging specialist, I fully understood the power of ageism to undermine a person's wellbeing; but professional knowledge failed to stop subconscious “aging scripts” from running the show.

Long story short: My return to the stage failed. I learned the dances and went through the motions; but all the while, the whole process felt foreign. Ultimately, I injured myself on dress rehearsal night and couldn't perform. The flood of disappointment was immediate, and then resignation swept in as strong and dangerous as an undertow... “I used to be a dancer”.

That could have ended my story. But much later, it hit me. I'd fallen prey to ageism. Me! I know that inactivity — not age — causes the majority of functional loss. Yet even with advanced education in healthy aging, and my reluctance to give up dancing, at the first signs of my own physical decline I'd let aging expectations sideline me.

So, at age 52, a busy professional, wife and mother of two, I found myself 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 ranging in age from 18-28.

But it wasn't an easy path. The physical training paled in comparison to what it took to overcome both external aging stereotypes and covert aging beliefs. First, I had to admit that “intellectually” I had let myself off the hook by framing my retreat as an issue of time, which I didn't have, rather than age. However, that revealed a subconscious belief that “at my age” I would have to invest heroic amounts of time to accomplish my goals.

Mads Perch / Stone via Getty Images

Marshaling resources, floor-to-ceiling mirrors

I approached dance like a work project and identified the resources I needed to be successful: strength, flexibility, balance and a good friend in whom I could confide my mission. My intermittent cardio-and-strength training sessions became a twice-per-week commitment, and then I added dance classes twice a week.

But walking into the dance studio posed a different kind of challenge. There's nothing quite like floor-to-ceiling mirrors and being surrounded by a roomful of dancers — none over 25 — to make you feel self-conscious. But, there was something more; not one of them would meet my eyes. I taught dance five days a week for over 10 years, right here. How could I feel so out of place in a dance studio — my dance studio? I hadn't expected that, nor had I anticipated this wall of indifference. Perhaps I could casually point out my picture painted into the colorful mural of dancers leaping and spinning above the mirrors. No, I was going to have to earn my place.

Overcoming challenges

My resolve was tested continually: when I had to choose between attending a professional conference and dancing, when I doubted my ability to choreograph a dance, when my knee started to hurt and when I started to feel anxious about performing.

I had been one of the best dancers. Could I stand to be average? And what about that invisible line — the one I crossed somewhere along the way where people felt compelled to add “for your age” onto otherwise welcome compliments. Did I want to be just good “for my age?” I had to make a conscious effort almost every day to override aging stereotypes and self-doubt that I thought I had conquered years ago.

“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. The solution: Advil, ice, stretch, strengthen and better warm-up.

“I probably shouldn't use that move; I could hurt myself.”

Did I have the necessary strength, flexibility and balance? If so, get with it; and if not, what can I do to regain them?

Reclaiming joy

Gradually, some eye contact and smiles, as well as more confidence and joy in movement, graced my hours at the studio. When a dancer asked, “Can you show me that move?” I knew I had graduated from being a mere curiosity. When I regressed to the attitude of doing well enough “not to embarrass myself,” my friend Toby challenged my thinking and then drove seven hours to be here the week of the show.

Curtain up, lights on cue, music friends, husband and kids in the audience — what a rush! The piece was good. I was good. And the experience was life-affirming.

Fast forward 8 years

After that, I danced in every yearly show; and as a 60th birthday present to myself, I choreographed and performed a physically challenging piece to Aretha Franklin's classic song, “Rock Steady.” And here's the deal — I was stronger, leaner and more flexible at age 60 than I was at age 52. What's more, I was stronger, leaner and more flexible than many of the dancers in my piece who were 20-32 years old. I put the same amount of time into training as the younger dancers. No heroic investments necessary.

3 more years

I wish I could say it's been smooth dancing since then. But shortly after the “Rock Steady” performance, I hurt my back trying to move something far too heavy, resulting in a year of almost constant pain and no dancing. None of the usual fixes — rest, massage, chiropractic care, acupuncture, etc. — seemed to help. Discouraging? Yes, but the difference was my scripts didn't blame age, so I kept looking until I found solutions. Plus, I had the Growing Bolder community as a constant reminder of what's possible in the face of challenges!

Gratefully, I returned to the dance concert last year, and I am now preparing to choreograph and perform in this year's show.



...I had to make a conscious effort almost every day to override aging stereotypes and self-doubt that I thought I had conquered years ago.



Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly.