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What Is Your Subjective Age

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by Lauren Dzubow

Answer these ten questions, and then turn to the key on the last page.

1. When I watch a movie, I usually identify with the character...
 - A. who is closest to my age.
 - B. who looks like me.
 - C. who is the lead in the story.
 - D. whose personality most resembles mine.
2. If I woke up one morning with a sore wrist, I would...
 - A. feel frustrated and upset; just one more sign of aging.
 - B. make an appointment with my chiropractor.
 - C. ignore the pain and assume it will go away on its own.
 - D. try to figure out what I did yesterday that may have caused the tenderness.
3. The best years in life are during...
 - A. childhood.
 - B. middle age.
 - C. early adulthood.
 - D. no particular stage. Some years are just better than others.
4. If I had to run a 5k race for charity against 50 people my age, I would...
 - A. fake a stomach cramp.
 - B. bring up the rear, no doubt.
 - C. train hard and aim to be the first across the finish line.
 - D. enjoy it and not worry about the competition.
5. When I'm reading a book...
 - A. I get distracted by the littlest things. I prefer short stories to novels.
 - B. my mind wanders occasionally, but then I get back into the story.
 - C. I look for excuses to do other things.
 - D. I let myself become absorbed by the text.
6. The people whom I interact with most frequently are...
 - A. older by more than five years.
 - B. older by up to five years.
 - C. younger than I am.
 - D. about the same age as I am.

7. If I got an error message on my computer, I would...
 - A. take it to the repair counter at Best Buy.
 - B. call a younger family member and ask her to trouble shoot with me on the phone.
 - C. put off fixing it and try to borrow a friend's computer in the meantime.
 - D. google the error message to see if I could resolve the issue on my own.

8. I worry about getting older...
 - A. nearly every day.
 - B. from time to time.
 - C. never. I avoid that kind of thinking.
 - D. only on my birthday.

9. Compared to the past, I get colds...
 - A. much more regularly these days.
 - B. a bit more often than before.
 - C. as often as I used to.
 - D. slightly less frequently.

10. When I look in the mirror, I...
 - A. cringe at my reflection.
 - B. examine myself for new evidence of aging.
 - C. see the same woman I saw ten years ago and thank my DNA.
 - D. feel content with who I see.

If your responses are mostly A's...

You dread getting older and worry over every little sign of aging -- from crow's feet to the occasional memory blip. Your fear may actually be causing you to age faster. Study after study has shown evidence of this link; in fact, one of my former students, psychologist Becca Levy, found that people who view aging negatively live, on average, 7 1/2 years less than people who see it positively.

Although aging isn't all in our heads, of course, a good deal of it appears to be mental. In an experiment I conducted at Harvard, I arranged for a group of elderly men to spend a week at a retreat living as though they were 20 years younger. Even the magazines they read of the TV shows they watch were from two decades earlier. Afterward they showed dramatic improvements in memory, hearing, vision, dexterity, strength, and even posture. My participants were in their 80s, but the lesson they learned is universal: by changing your perspective, you can turn back your clock.

The first step is to stop focusing on scary "symptoms" of aging. More often than not, they are exaggerated or even imagined. Take memory loss, for instance. Because you expect to lose your faculties over time, you'll interpret misplacing your keys, or blanking on the date of the Norman conquest, as proof of cognitive decay. However, forgetfulness happens in every age; you just don't think anything about when you're 19 or 27.

Then there is the physical the client. If you consider it inevitable, you're likely to forgo the obvious solution: training to keep yourself fit.

If your responses are mostly B's...

Although you don't obsess about aging, it concerns you. As a result, you're subconsciously projecting the future into your present, and perceiving yourself a bit older than you really are. People who fall into this category tend to overlook the value of growing older. The general scientific consensus is that we get happier as time goes on -- not to mention wiser, more resilient, and better at relationships.

My suggestion to you is to try to develop an appreciation for your experience to date. Begin by making lists: 10 ways your life is better now than it was in your 20s. Five ways you are smarter than you were five years ago. The goal is to relax about the passage of time and start living more in the here and now.

Another way to allay aging anxiety is to become involved in new activities (volunteering at an animal shelter, joining a community garden, or the like).

Aging is often associated with a narrowing of self-definition -- to mother or grandmother or old person. However, when you play a variety of roles in your life, any single label becomes less significant.

If your responses are mostly C's...

If you could make time stand still, you would. We know that by acting young, it's possible to stay young -- but only to a certain degree. If you go too far, you could do yourself harm. For example, you might be working too hard (as hard as you did when you began your career), or drinking too much, or even over exercising. I recall one study subject to was a perfect example of this; at 77 he was living the same frenetic lifestyle he had been in his 30s. When the doctors tested him, they found that he was biologically older than his age.

You likely have deep-seated fears of how time will change you. Yet by trying to avoid aging, you're actually focusing on it (when trying not to think of a white elephant, it's impossible not to think of a white elephant).

Your challenge is to let go of this preoccupation. My advice is to befriend people in different stages of life. You may worry that you have little in common with older people, but let yourself be surprised. As you see past the ages of your new friends, you'll start to see past your age, too.

If your responses are mostly D's...

You embrace your age, without shame or fear, and consequently are able to live a richer, more authentic, and more balanced life. This sort of emotional peace is the best anti-aging remedy.

What do your answers reveal?

What action steps are indicated, if any?

What are you willing to change to achieve what you desire?

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Susan

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