Late-Life Depression and Living Life Fully

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This issue of Psychiatric Annals, guest edited by George S. Alexopoulos, MD, director of the Weill Cornell Institute of Geriatric Psychiatry, has, with the help of his colleagues, provided us with a comprehensive update review of the causes and optimal management of late-life depression. The series includes an introductory article by Dr. Alexopoulos entitled, “Clinical and Neurobiological Findings, Treatment Developments in Late-Life Depression.” Following and fleshing out important subtopics are articles on the assessment and management of late-life depression by Jimmy N. Avari, MD, and colleagues; a wonderful review of executive functioning in late-life depression by Kevin J. Manning, PhD, and colleagues; a discussion of cognitive impairment in depressed older adults by Sarah Shizuko Morimoto, PsyD; and an exciting review of psychotherapies for late-life depression by Amanda R. McGovern, PhD, and associates.

This collection is a treasure in the sense that it provides an up-to-date review of what is known about late-life depression, as well as knowledge of mechanisms involved and what is known about its treatment.

As I approach 80 years of age this month, this information becomes more personal; it becomes harder to claim to be “stretching middle age.” Design flaws of one’s body begin to present themselves — the knee that you abused in your football days, the shoulder injury from trying to snowboard at 66. There are times when gravity seems more powerful, and it is hard to get out of bed at 5 a.m. to be at clinic on time to teach the residents. But it is still exciting for me to share the joy when one of my assigned residents succeeds in lifting a long-term, hopeless depression and the patient comes back to life again.

So, while reading about late-life depression, disability, and dementia, I hope you will share some thoughts on the opportunities of aging with me.

Every moment of consciousness becomes more precious. You don’t know when the excitement will end — you drink it in, no longer focusing on the fact that you can no longer ski, but instead training your attention on the joys that you can still experience in order to live as much per unit time that is left. (Who knows?)

I have developed my own technique for maximizing my awareness of living per unit time. I recite a mantra in my mind: “Life is unpredictable and transient — this may be my last experience.” When I do this, whatever I am experiencing becomes extremely real. I become mindful; no multitasking. Everything is more dimensional, acutely present. I am “beating time,” living more per unit time. Focusing my attention on the joy of being conscious, not on the fact that some things I can no longer do. I know at some unpredictable time it will all end, and this makes it all the more intense.

Shirley Horn sings to me, those beautiful verses from the song, Here’s to Life: “No complaints, and no regrets. I still believe in chasing dreams and placing bets. While I’m still in the game, I want to play. Here’s to life, for all the joys it brings.”

The hazards multiply as time passes — depression, disability, dementia, death. If you look at it from the big-picture perspective, though, being fully conscious of the joys of living can also increase. Is that part of wisdom?