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SECRETS OF
SUCCESSFUL
AGING

Must Read

*“Better With Age:
The Psychology of
Successful Aging”*

Alan Castel, Ph.D

Alan D. Castel, Ph.D

Age: 42

Born: Born in Denmark, raised in Canada and now a full-fledged Californian

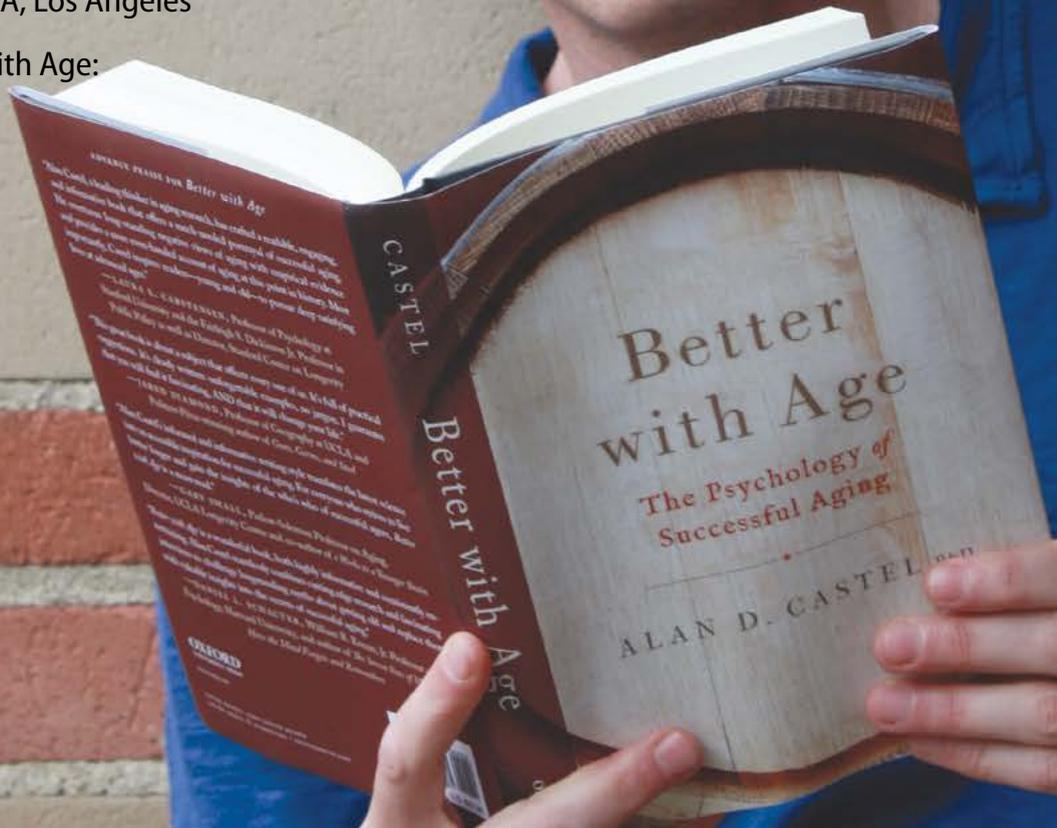
Education: Ph.D. from the University of Toronto

Marital Status: Married to an incredible woman with three wonderful children

Occupation: Professor of Cognitive Psychology at UCLA, Los Angeles

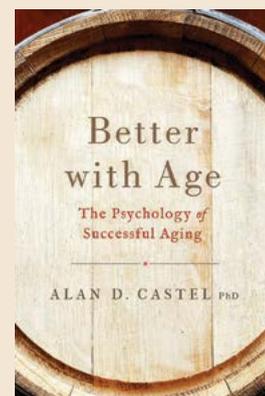
Author: "Better with Age: The Psychology of Successful Aging"

Residence: Los Angeles, CA





“Find who and what you love and have balance in your life”



Q: What messages are you trying to communicate in your new book: “Better With Age. The Psychology of Successful Aging?”

Many people think about aging in negative ways and there are certainly challenges as we get older. But in many ways, life can be very satisfying, especially when we reflect back on our lives, what we have done and our family connections. Successful aging can be accomplished in many different ways and sometimes we need role models to show us just how good life can be after 60, 70 or 80. I interviewed many interesting older adults (such as Jack LaLanne, Bob Newhart, Maya Angelou and John Wooden) and they all were enthusiastic and inspiring role models of successful aging.

Q: What gets better with age?

While we may seem more forgetful (this can happen after the age of 20!), in many ways we adapt to the changes as they happen and can focus on what is important. My research at UCLA has shown that older adults are more selective about what they try to remember and this can be very beneficial as we are often overwhelmed with information and to do lists. Our perspective in life may be better. Older adults often can use experience and wisdom to navigate life in ways that younger people are not yet familiar with and I think these skills can be critical when we reach midlife and older age.

Q: What are some common myths of aging?

Some people think old age is dreary or full of depressive thoughts but if you are healthy and active, then this often isn't the case at all. Many older adults report high levels of life satisfaction, feel busy and stay active, feel more confident about one's self (greater self-esteem and less self-conscious), have better emotion regulation, have a more balanced perspective and are curious to learn or focus on things that are interesting. While habits may be more pronounced and predictability is important (we might like going to the same restaurants), often as we age we are interested in learning new things or travelling. Lifelong learning is a part of successful aging and we never stop learning just because we aren't in school.

Q: Are older adults happy?

It really depends on how you think of happiness. Life satisfaction can be better in older age and older adults often report higher levels of day-to-day happiness compared to college-aged students but it likely is a different kind of happiness in older age. Often older adults will focus more on positive things in their lives, whereas younger people may worry more and fret over important life decisions. Surprisingly, middle-age seems to be a low point in terms of happiness which could be for a

number of reasons but it is nice to know that it can get better!

Q: Is there decline in creativity as we age?

In many ways, creativity can blossom as we age. We might view the world in different ways, appreciate different perspectives and also see novel connections. At the same time, we may care less about what others might think so we are more likely to engage in creativity, whether it is when gardening, writing, painting or playing music. As a different and practical example, the pilot “Sully” Sullenberger, then age 58, heroically





carried out an emergency landing on the Hudson River and had to use skill, courage and “high-pressure” creativity to do something that no one has done before.

Q: What is an active lifestyle?

Being active can involve different things but it doesn't necessarily mean we are constantly in a rush. Being active also means having balance, in terms of doing things we enjoy, being around people who are important to us and finding time to stay busy with what is important to us. An active lifestyle could involve some level of physical activity (such as walking and dancing) with social connections (meeting friends or professional colleagues) and also some cognitive stimulation (reading, music, travelling). Many people say they feel that retirement allows more time to do what they really want to do without the

stress of a packed schedule of things they don't really enjoy.

Q: Is Alzheimer's disease on the decline?

The number of people who have Alzheimer's disease is projected to rise; perhaps simply because more people are living longer. However, some studies suggest that there actually is a decline in the proportion of people who are getting the disease, compared to a few decades ago. This decline could be because people now have higher levels of education and do things in their lives that can help prevent or delay the disease such as walking, eating better and being socially connected. Since there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, what we do earlier in our lives, and the habits we develop, can help protect us from dementia in older age.

Q: Why is loneliness the scariest part of retirement?

Many people don't realize that when they retire or move, they leave behind a large social network. Even just occasional small talk at our workplace can be an important part of being socially connected. I think there is some stigma associated with saying you are lonely so people might not talk about it, making it a “silent” issue. Family, friends (and even pets) can help but often people need to have regular interactions that make them feel valued or understood—sometimes just being a regular at a coffee shop, library, volunteer group or exercise class can be a great way to stay connected.

Q: Is walking the best medicine?

Walking is good for both your body and your brain. One study found that

people who walked three times a week for 40 minutes showed an increase in the size of hippocampus (a key brain area involved in memory). This part of the brain typically declines after the age of 50 so an increase means improved brain health and better memory. Also, we start to lose muscle mass and strength after age 30 so weight training is needed to help muscles grow, improve bone health, and lifting weights can also improve memory and brain health. So despite the belief that crossword puzzles or eating blueberries can help our brain stay healthy, exercise is the best medicine and it is free!

Q: What are some of the best ways to keep sharp?

Staying active, trying new things (having some variety) and walking seem to be the keys. It is also important to do balance training (try standing on one leg for a few seconds) as falls are what often hospitalize people after the age of 50. You don't need to go to a yoga class to do balance training. I practice it every morning when I am brushing my teeth (standing on one leg for 1 minute and then switching). I probably shouldn't multi-task but it is a routine that I have started and I notice that my



balance has improved—most people don't notice poor balance until they have had a bad fall.

Q: Are attitudes changing about aging and older adults?

Our Western culture doesn't value older age the way other cultures do and I hope that changes (especially as I get older!). Our own attitudes about aging do influence how we age so if you think positively about what can happen as you get older, then you might be active and healthier and you might live longer. That is one message in my new book "Better with Age: The Psychology of Successful Aging". I hope reading about inspiring older adults and the latest research on successful aging can show people at any age what to expect, and hopefully enjoy, as we all get older.

Q: What do you think are the secrets to health and longevity?

The famous UCLA basketball coach John Wooden told me the two most important things in life were LOVE and BALANCE. Find who and what you love and have balance in your life, both mentally and physically. I think these can lead to a healthy and happy (and hopefully long) life. He lived to age 99!