

Psychological Adjustment to Aging with Spinal Cord Injury

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Fact Sheet

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Positive and Negative Aspects of Aging

Aging with a spinal cord injury can have significant impact on one's independence and need for physical assistance. The process of aging can often be accompanied by an emotional and psychological adjustment period during times of transition or need for greater assistance. Aging also often has positive aspects that can influence the mindset of individuals and allow the individuals to experience "posttraumatic growth."¹

| Positive Aspects to Aging | Negative Aspects to Aging |
|---|---|
| <p><u>Posttraumatic Growth:</u>² Positive psychological change in response to a</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • challenging experience with 5 domains: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Growth: increased sense of one's own personal strength <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Personal strength is the highest reported area of growth after SCI.³ • Spiritual Change: deepening of spiritual life • Appreciation of Life • New Possibilities/Opportunities • Relating to Others: increased sense of connection to other people | <p><u>Physical Changes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher risk for comorbidities such as, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.⁷ • Increased incidence of musculoskeletal injuries due to overuse, especially in the shoulders.⁸ • Increased incidence of fractures due to osteoporosis and/or kidney problems. |
| <p><u>Technology and Medication</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancing technology, high quality medications and physical aides can increase independence and convenience.⁴ | <p><u>Cognitive Changes</u>⁹</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While intelligence does not change with age, attention and working memory decrease, which may impede independence. |
| <p><u>Acceptance and Society</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over time, individuals can become more comfortable with their injury.⁵ • Increasing comfort level of society with people with disabilities⁶ | <p><u>Social Changes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging is associated with fewer social interactions.¹⁰ • Individuals can be restricted to the home due to loss of driving ability.¹¹ • Changes in support system such as the loss of a spouse. |

Ways to promote successful adaptation to Aging

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Though many of the negative aspects of aging cannot be avoided, there are ways to focus on positive aspects of aging to improve mental and physical health as much as possible. Successful aging has been defined as consisting of three components: decreased probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and active engagement with life.¹² Individuals with spinal cord injury are encouraged to focus on these three areas.

Specific recommendations are as follows:

- Be as physically active as possible
- Seek information about the newest technologies to remain as independent as possible
- Accept and solicit help from others when needed, advocate for oneself
- Engage in “brain fitness” activities like crossword puzzles and reading
- Develop & maintain strong relationships with friends & family
- Be involved in the SCI community (e.g., join local support groups, participate in online forums or Facebook groups)
- Work or volunteer to have a sense of purpose
- Focus on the present
- Engage in gratitude exercises (e.g., write 3 good things that happened at the end of each day)¹

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