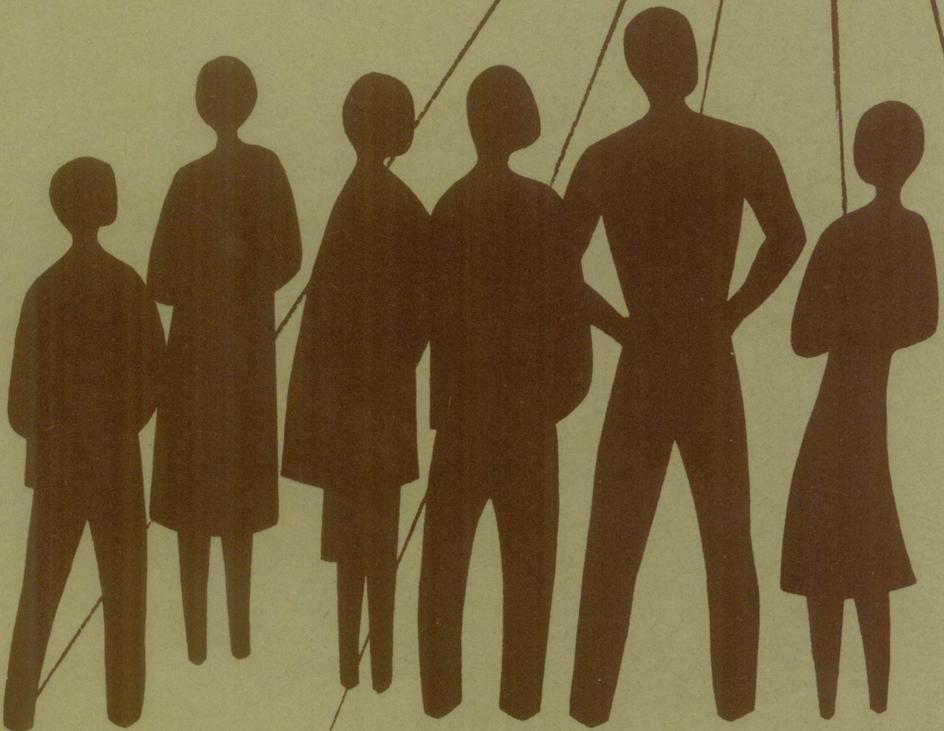


Old age (1952)

Public Health Publication No. 116

Looking Forward to the **LATER YEARS**



FEDERAL SECURITY AGENCY • Public Health Service • National Institute of Mental Health

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Looking Forward

To The LATER YEARS

How Old Are You?

The old lady in the bus looked at the studious little boy sitting beside her and turned conversationally to his mother. "How old is your boy?" she asked. She received more of an answer than she had bargained for.

"Physically, he's 10 years old. Emotionally, about 7. Intellectually, he is 15. Counting birthdays, he'll be 9 years old next Thursday."

The old lady was taken aback for a moment. Then, with some relief, she noticed that the bus had reached her stop, and she got off before the serious little boy who was 10, 7, 15, and 9 years old could ask her what her own age was. She wondered what her answer—her full answer—would have had to be.

How old are you?—55—65—75—85? Think again. Have you a single age? Or, like the little boy, are you made up of a lot of different ages?

Many Ages

Ask a scientist about this age business. He will tell you that aging is a very complicated process. It goes forward at quite different rates in different people. And, in any one individual, aging goes ahead at different rates in different parts of the body and for different physical and mental abilities.

Take growth, for example. As we know, growth of the human body is most rapid before the baby is born, while it is still in the mother's body. Throughout life, growth gradually slows down. That is why older people recover from injuries more slowly than children do—their damaged tissues don't grow back as fast.

Most of our abilities—strength, learning capacity, emotional stability, and so on—increase most rapidly through childhood and usually reach a peak somewhere in the twenties or thirties. Then some, like strength and agility, start to decline. Others, like learning capacity and memory, decline much more slowly. Many people of very advanced years have lost little or none of these abilities; in maturity of judgment and tolerance, they may continue to gain.

No Deadline

What does this all add up to? Briefly, it means that there is no day on which you suddenly become old.

As you know, we cannot say that at a certain age one stops being a child and becomes an adult. All of us go through a long process—adolescence—when lots of times we act quite grown-up and lots of times we act like silly, irresponsible children. Legally we come of age at 21, but even then we may not be grown-up all over—inside and out. As we well know, some people never really grow up and act their age.

In the same way, you don't stop being middle-aged on your sixty-fifth birthday and become "old" just because you may now be eligible for a pension. In some ways, you are old; in many ways, you are still young.

Good Years Ahead

Today, life expectancy is about 20 years longer than it was in 1900. This means that the average American now lives to be more than 70 years old.

Thus, more of us can expect to live well into our seventies, eighties, and nineties. More than that, we can do much to make these years fruitful and happy.

As you start into the later decades, you don't get around as fast as you did in your youth and you wouldn't expect or want your last years to be as jam-packed with new experiences and problems as your first 20 or 30 years. However, there is no reason why you should not make a good thing of these years. They are the culmination of life. You have had a lot of trouble—and a lot of enjoyment, too. You can look forward to more trouble—and more enjoyment and satisfaction!

Facing the Facts

"When did you realize that you were getting old?" Some years ago a scientist put this question to a number of elderly people. Some of the answers were quite surprising. One said he had started to feel old at the age of 18. Another didn't realize that age was creeping up until he was already 82.

Realization that we are getting older often comes, when it does come, as something of a shock. One person may suddenly realize that illnesses keep piling up and that they are harder to shake off. Another may discover that, although he can still do a day's work, it now takes 2 days to get it done!

Some of the most common experiences that bring realization of aging are the marriage of children, becoming a grandparent, and seeing these new families lead lives of their own.

Being retired is another kind of shock that may usher in the later years. Or loss of a job and being unable to get another because of gray hairs.

Maybe old friends are beginning to die, leaving gaps that are hard to fill with new friends.

At times like these, people often become very upset — which is not surprising. However, it can be a good thing to face the fact of aging, because aging brings new and challenging problems. And if you realize this fact, you have made a good start on planning for successful years ahead.

Stock Taking

Throughout life, from time to time, most of us sit down quietly and take stock of what we are doing and where we are going. Figuring up our assets and liabilities, we decide what to do for a living, whom to marry, where to live, how to bring up our children. In many cases, this planning is not a very conscious process; often we more or less drift into things. As we get older, however, it is wise to make serious and conscious plans for the future. For one thing, many new problems must be faced. For another thing, some very important problems may have been with us so long that we may not recognize them as problems unless we sit down to think things out. And often we find that the longer the problem is with us, the harder it is to lick. Periodic stock taking or inventory is a wise practice for businesses—and for people.

Medical Inventory

A good place to start is in a doctor's office. How long is it since you had a *complete check-up*? Many doctors recommend a complete physical examination as the best birthday present you can give yourself every year after you are 35 or 40. You can go to your family doctor, taking care to make an appointment so that he will have time to look you over thoroughly. Or you might go to an internist. Or perhaps you want to go to a clinic where you can be examined by a number of specialists if necessary.

Many people feel that if they go to the doctor when there seems to be nothing wrong with them, they are looking for trouble. True, the doctor may find trouble, but it probably will be the right kind of trouble—early signs of illness that you never noticed and that can be cured or checked because it was found early.

Together with your doctor, you can plan for a healthier future. Maybe he will find that you need new glasses or that you need glasses for the first time. It is very exceptional for people not to become farsighted as they grow older. Also, many people become hard of hearing. Modern hearing aids, increasingly popular and little more noticed than glasses, can overcome many hearing losses. Your doctor may tell you to see a dentist about repair work on your teeth or dentures. He knows that, without good teeth, you may well be eating a soft, inadequate diet that doesn't give you the minerals, proteins, and vitamins you need.

He can advise as to what you can do and can't do by way of exercise and work. He can warn you about some of the bad habits you may have slipped into, like not eating enough vitamin-rich foods, calcium, or proteins, smoking too much, not getting enough exercise. You may well protest at some of the things he tells you—but good care of the body pays off and you can't start too early.

Careful plans for a healthier future are a big step ahead toward a happier future.

Financial Inventory

Now let's study the matter of occupation and income.

Generally speaking, people want to keep on working as long as they can. This goes for the bricklayer, the lawyer, the school teacher, and everyone else who earns a living. There are several good reasons for this. One is that most of us need the money. Another is that all of us, no matter how old or how young, need to know deep down inside that we are doing something productive and useful. Work has other values, too. For many, it gives an opportunity for pleasant social life, sometimes just during lunch and rest periods, often as part of the work itself. Furthermore, work can give a sense of worth—it can have a moral value in itself. Then, again, for everyone at one time or another, work is just a burden and a bother.

Did you know that half of the men over 65 are gainfully employed? Among women the proportion is much lower, of course, but increasing. The majority of women spend their middle years as housewives, and not all can be expected to enter the job market even after their children have grown up. (Many do, however, and more every year). Eighty years ago, employment among older men was much higher—4 out of 5 worked for a living. The fact is that it is much harder for older people—both men and women—to get and keep jobs today. So, to keep on working, it is wise to plan ahead.

Up in Canada, the Toronto employment service has tried an experiment. They took 500 older men, most of whom had been looking for work without success for many months and gave them special counseling. Result: the majority of them got jobs. The service helped these people in three ways: by helping them get a clear idea of what kinds of jobs were open, by helping them find out which jobs they were best suited for, and by helping them gain back lost confidence in their own abilities.

Today there are few such special services for older job seekers. So perhaps you will have to act as your own counseling service. Ask yourself some questions. For example:

(1) How long, assuming I keep in pretty good health, will I be able to keep on at my present work?

(2) What other kinds of work can I do with my present abilities? What kinds of work could I do with a little new training?

(3) Would I be able to continue work longer if I changed to some other kind of work? What are the possibilities?

(4) How about part-time work? Or a less strenuous job, even if it pays less? Would something like that fit my needs?

To help find realistic answers to these questions, why not talk with an interviewer at the public employment service office in your community? Or maybe your superior or the employment counselor where you work now?

Income is another subject for study. As a person gets older and is less apt to be working, money usually becomes more of a problem. Even among older people who still are working, earning power often goes down. Few people have large, comfortable annuities. Most people who no longer work must live on relatively small pensions, old-age and survivors insurance, public assistance, or help from their families.

Generally, grown children cannot both take care of their parents and give the coming generation all that it needs for a fair start in life. We are rapidly getting away from the idea that they must accept this double responsibility. Thus, in planning for future financial needs, it is wise for parents to talk the situation over frankly with the family and perhaps get some outside advice from someone who understands such matters. Banks are interested in helping in the management of small incomes as well as large and may give very profitable suggestions. Social agencies are definitely not to be regarded as places to go for "charity"; their family service counselors can give practical help and information on how to get along on a small income and on possibilities of supplementing income to meet needs.

It isn't necessary to have a whole lot of money to enjoy the later years. Nevertheless, a great deal of planning may depend on financial resources.

Family Inventory

A hundred years ago, when people were more likely to live in a farmhouse and have a dozen youngsters, the family was something quite different from what it is now. Today most people live in towns and cities, usually in small houses or apartments, and have fewer children. Whether this change is good or bad is a question for much discussion. But good, or bad, these are the facts.

Along with these changes have come other changes. Usually a man becomes head of a family when he marries rather than, as in other times and other countries, when his father dies. People sometimes say this means that the parents are pushed into the background. However, it also means that the parents' responsibilities for family affairs and support are relieved.

Let's take a look at the family. How much of a responsibility are they? How much of your time and help do they need? If the younger members are grown and self-supporting, are you free to lead your own life and follow your own interests?

It is easy to get too emotionally tied to a close family circle. Many older people feel that the children are growing away from them. They do not realize that they, too, may really be growing away from the children. This kind of misunderstanding can bring unhappiness and resentments. Best is a clear recognition of each member's needs and interests, together with understanding that part of everyone's life belongs to the family and part belongs outside, with job, friends, and recreation. The well-rounded person does not put all his emotional eggs in one basket. He keeps on growing up all through his life, finding new tasks and new interests. Such people are seldom overcome by family responsibilities and ties. The great thing about the family is that it can give a central stability and security to life, no matter what the ups and downs, whether parents and children live together or in separate homes. But to fill this role, the family spirit must not be endangered by too many emotional demands and tensions.

Activities Inventory

A noted doctor who specializes in treating older people states indignantly that too few of them wear out; most of them rust out. He isn't just talking about their bodies. He means that they don't use their minds enough either.

A good many people who retire—and who have looked forward to retirement for many years—suddenly find after a few weeks of leisure that time hangs heavy. The trouble is that these people retired *from* work, not *to* new activities. Enjoyable use of leisure, like anything else, requires planning.

Think back. What have you always wanted to do when you were too busy making a living or raising a family? What kinds of things did you like to do when you had some spare time? Maybe you aren't spry enough for some of these activities any more, but lots of them you still can do. If none of these still strikes your fancy, shop around. See what kinds of activities you can take up around the house, through your church, at the "Y," or in other local organizations.

Some people want to do things that have a purpose. They may like to make furniture for their home, grow their own vegetables and can them—something that will bring useful results for themselves and others. Some people want to use their leisure to work more actively as citizens of their community.

Other people don't care whether what they do is useful or not, as long as they have fun doing it. But people usually get most enjoyment out of creative activities. There's Grandma Moses, a farm lady who took up oil painting in her seventies without a thought in her head of doing anything except enjoying herself. Her pictures now are seen in some of our major art collections, on Christmas cards, and are even used as designs on drapery materials. We can't all be that good, but we can

have fun making things with paint or clay, trying out new needlework designs, growing flowers, or writing poetry.

Collecting can be interesting and profitable. Stamps, coins, glass, old-fashioned dolls, arrowheads, match covers—you name it and you can be sure that someone collects it and that there is probably an active organization of collectors.

Most people have to look around quite a bit before they find their real interests. Another important consideration is whether you like to do things by yourself or with others. It is a good idea to try out a number of different activities *before you retire*. Sooner or later you will find some that give real, solid satisfaction.

Social Inventory

One important kind of activity was not mentioned above—social activity. There is nothing like getting together with one or two old friends for an evening of talk. It's nice to have people over for supper or maybe just for a cup of coffee. It's pleasant to make up a party to go out to the ball game or on a picnic. Being with people is not only pleasant; it can also help keep you up-to-date on what is going on, give you new ideas and things to think about.

As we get older, we often find it harder to keep up our social contacts. Many widows and widowers find that they don't see as much of the old bunch as they used to. Friends get older, too, and may not be able to get around as they once did. They may move away to another neighborhood or another town. Sometimes, too, when people retire they find that what they miss is not the job itself as much as the casual social life around the office or shop. Some people find it harder to make new friends and may get into something of a rut, seeing only an increasingly narrow circle of family and neighbors.

Of course, some people never cared particularly about taking part in social affairs at any time of their lives—and there is no reason why they should start an active social life in later years. Nevertheless, it is pretty well agreed that friends and friendship make a lot of difference, particularly after retirement from more active life. Many people make very happy and successful marriages or remarriages in the later years. Just keeping in touch with congenial people can bring great pleasure and satisfaction.

There are a great many ways to meet new people, even if you don't make friends quickly or easily. One of the best ways is to join some organization—a church group, a club, an art class, a choral group. The best way to get to know people is to work with them on things you are interested in.

In some cities—New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and in smaller places, too—special clubs and social centers have been organized for older people. These provide a place where people can enjoy club activities and informal

social life at little or no expense. Your local welfare or recreation department or perhaps your church can tell you about these and other groups that may exist in your town. (If you don't find one in your community, why not help start one?)

Summing Up

Now that you have taken stock of your life as it is today, in midstream, you probably have a pretty good idea of what your chief assets are and what are your major liabilities. You are better able to plan ahead. You can figure out what you would like to do to give you more satisfaction in the future.

During World War I, a Swiss doctor visiting prisoner of war camps noticed what he called "barbed wire sickness," a complete dejection and lack of interest in anything beyond the immediate necessities of life. He claimed that something similar can happen to ordinary people when they fail to keep up an interest in the future. Unlike prisoners, however, most of us can plan for tomorrow and beyond. This can give our lives that essential ingredient which Dr. Edward Stieglitz has called "the fourth dimension of life which is time."

Work in Progress

Nor can you take inventory once and have it done with. Just as the doctor will tell you that you need regular physical check-ups, so is it advisable to keep what the businessman calls a "perpetual inventory" on other things. Life doesn't stand still. The body changes and, with it, physical needs. Circumstances and surroundings change and, with these, interests and activities.

Enjoying the Later Years

Here are a number of hints and ideas that have helped others in the past. They may prove helpful to you.

BEING INDEPENDENT

How does a person feel when for the first time a younger man or woman rises to offer a seat in a crowded streetcar?

After a long, hard day, such a gesture may be received with gratitude. Nevertheless, to most people will also come a slight feeling of resentment. "Do I really look so old?"

As people grow older, they are often treated as if they were a lot more helpless than they really are. They are quite right in feeling resentful but should remember that this attitude is well meant and arises from basic politeness and thoughtfulness for others.

Age need never be a reason for loss of self-respect or sense of usefulness. Unless a person becomes a complete invalid—and this can happen at any age—one can always be useful and contribute to the welfare of others.

There is a reverse side to this bright coin of independence. One does not only ask respect and independence. These must be earned. Demanding too much of the family, who have their own responsibilities, is asking to be dependent. Sometimes it may be better to get out and ask for aid from other sources—maybe for financial assistance, maybe for counsel and advice.

TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY

Watch children at play in the home or at a playground. They are completely serious, wrapped up in their enjoyment of what they are doing. Is blockbuilding, mud-pie making, or playing tag a waste of time? Nothing of the sort. These youngsters are learning—probably more intensely and to more purpose than they learn at school. They learn how to use their hands, legs, and brains. They are learning how to get along with other children and with grown-ups, too.

Adults can play, too. Of course, they don't "play" the same way as children. Hobbies, ball games, chess or checkers, dances, picnics—all of these and many more adult leisure time activities are things people do just for fun.

Unfortunately, adults are apt to forget how to play. They often come to see play only as a waste of time.

But play, at any age, can be both enjoyable and useful. All of us can continue to learn through play. Particularly after many years of work, you deserve to enjoy yourself. And from your store of experience and knowledge, you are equipped to play seriously, to find satisfaction in many different kinds of creative activities, and to find relaxation and enjoyment in things that you do just for fun.

LEARNING

That saying about old dogs and new tricks has done a great deal of harm. People come to believe that their ability to learn new facts, understand new ideas, and acquire new skills is lost after the first years of youth.

The fact is, as psychologists have shown, that most people have the same ability to learn in the later years that they did as children. If there is any real difference, it is that older people tend to learn more slowly but more carefully and thoroughly.

The big difference between learning at different ages seems to be in interests and purposes. The school child learns the multiplication table to get good marks from the teacher. A boy memorizes the batting averages of big league players to impress his pals. No matter how old a person is, if he or she has a purpose for learning or an interest in the subject, learning can always go on. A friend can teach those fancy embroidery stitches. A book from the public library can tell how to grow a garden full of luscious vegetables. Knowledge of current affairs helps one to be a wise and useful citizen. One of the courses offered at night school or at the university may arouse curiosity and interest.

GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

This pamphlet was written, first of all, to help older people help themselves. But increasingly we realize that older people must help the younger people with whom they live and work. Unfortunately, friction and intolerance are all too common between people of different generations. Different ideas and different ways of doing things can bring serious conflicts. Younger people are apt to complain that older people are cranky, stubborn. To older people, the younger generations may seem pretty hard to get along with.

To help get along with younger people, it may be useful to keep in mind some of the roots of such conflict and mutual irritation. By understanding one's own actions and attitudes, it may be easier to understand others.

For example, the later years often force major readjustments after years of more or less settled living. This can cause much worry and emotional tension. And it is often perfectly natural to "take it out" on someone else—perfectly natural but not helpful in keeping friendly relations.

Furthermore, older people often have physical handicaps that are constant sources of discomfort or annoyance. It is hard to keep cheerful with chronic arthritis. It is hard to feel part of a social group with bad hearing.

And it is hard for someone who once supported a family to be dependent on others. Or for the former homemaker to think herself regarded as useless and in the way. Grumbling and crankiness are often the only way that older people know how to express hurt pride and damaged self-respect.

However, younger people have problems, too. They probably are—or think they are—just as serious as the older person's. Thus, the older person cannot ask for special sympathy. The older person *can* ask for:

Understanding and respect.

Consideration—but not excessive, unwanted coddling.

① Opportunity to maintain a sense of purpose and usefulness through continued development of creative and interesting activities.

LIVING WITH ILLNESS AND DISABILITIES

We cannot escape the fact that, as people grow older, they get sick more frequently and often are afflicted by long-lasting illnesses and disabilities.

Some people go on for years, suffering unnecessarily from handicaps that could be corrected by medical science. Today, more and more disabilities can and should be removed. Recent newspaper reports told how an old lady, who had suffered from cataracts for many years, had been given back her sight at the age of 115. Modern developments have greatly increased the possibilities and safety of medical treatment, even for the very old.

For some people with a chronic disease or handicap, medical treatment cannot reverse the damage already done. These people can do much for themselves by learning how to live with such conditions. The problem is to figure out how to lead as normal a life as possible. The doctor will tell what can and what cannot be done in the way of activities, diet, and nursing care to bring relief. Even within severe physical limitations, people can often be remarkably self-supporting and self-sufficient, less of a burden upon others. Doctors, especially, realize that this may not be easy. In addition to medical care, however, a person can get help from other specialists such as physical therapists (who work under the doctor's direction), occupational therapists, and vocational counselors.

GETTING HELP

Throughout life, when problems arise that require special information or understanding for good solutions, it is wise to get help. Very often, people grow too close to their own problems; the unimportant things become large out of all proportion; and the emotions interfere with common sense.

A doctor is usually a good source of help. Even if a problem is not entirely concerned with health, the doctor may be able to give advice or tell you where you can get it.

Clergymen, too, help people with personal problems. Like doctors, their ability to help is not limited to their special field. The clergyman's vocation not only makes him a source of spiritual guidance but also gives him the broad experience with different kinds of people and problems that are so valuable in helping people, old and young.

Other sources of aid are employment agencies, especially if the problem involves occupation or job. Social case workers are trained to help in family problems, as well as in economic difficulties. In some cities there are special guidance clinics for older people. The idea of such clinics was started by Dr. Lillian Martin, a remarkable woman who began her clinic in California after retiring at the age of 65 from an active life of teaching and who continued this work until her death at 92.

HELPING OTHERS

At all ages, helping others can be one of the deepest sources of solid satisfaction. Whether by material assistance, by lending a helping hand, or just by a cheerful word and smile, one is never too old to make life more pleasant for others.

In the home, of course, everyone can help in household tasks and family affairs according to his or her ability. A friendly, helpful neighbor, too, is liked by everyone.

As one grows older, there is often more leisure time to use in helping a wider circle of people. Community, church, and fraternal organizations offer many opportunities for useful and constructive work. Of special interest may be activities to help other older people. Dr. Martin, mentioned above, used her special training as a psychologist to do this for large

numbers of individuals. Even without special training, much can be done by older men and women of good will. One particularly worthwhile activity is helping to start a "golden age" club or day center. These have been organized in many cities, often with joint public and private support. Under proper direction and with help from volunteer workers, they provide social life, recreation, and useful occupation for many older persons.

TO FIND OUT WHAT YOUR COMMUNITY IS DOING

Consult the minister or the priest at your church, or the welfare department, the health department, the visiting nurse service, the community chest, the city recreation department, the extension service of the State university. One or more of these groups will be familiar with programs under way or being planned. You may be interested in taking part in existing programs, or you may find that there are others who would like to join with you in helping to get programs for older people started.

For Further Information

Books*

THE SECOND FORTY YEARS, by Edward J. Stieglitz. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1946. 317 pp.

Written for lay readers, this book covers the medical, psychological, and socio-economic problems of aging, and provides practical suggestions on keeping healthy.

NEW GOALS FOR OLD AGE, edited by George Lawton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943. 110 pp.

Discussions of some of the problems of older people and ways of solving them, are clearly presented.

MAN AND HIS YEARS, An Account of the First National Conference on Aging. Raleigh, N. C.: Health Publications Institute, Inc., 1951. 311 pp. *Reports from the conference held in 1950 under the sponsorship of the Federal Security Agency.*

GROWING IN THE OLDER YEARS, edited by Wilma Donahue and Clark Tibbitts. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1951. 204 pp.

This book, the third in a trilogy, deals primarily with medical health, mental health, and education.

Pamphlets

WHEN YOU GROW OLDER, by George Lawton and Maxwell S. Stewart. New York: Public Affairs Committee, 22 East 38th Street, New York 16, New York. 31 pp. 20¢.

Interesting reading for every adult at any age.

*These books can usually be obtained from the Public Library or purchased through any book shop.

LIVE LONG AND LIKE IT, by C. Ward Crampton, M. D. New York: Public Affairs Committee (see address above). 32 pp. 20¢.

Common sense discussion of how to maintain good health.

COMMUNITY ACTION FOR THE AGING, Aid to program planning. New York: New York State Association of Councils of Social Agencies, 105 E. 22d Street, New York 10, New York.

CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMS FOR THE MENTAL HEALTH OF THE ELDERLY, by Frederic D. Zeman, M. D. New York: The National Association for Mental Health, Inc., 1790 Broadway, New York 19, New York. 15¢.

Film

STEPS OF AGE, 16 MM. sound film, portraying some of the emotional problems of aging. Prints may be available on loan from the State Mental Health Authority, or from film libraries at the university or public library in your State. Prints can be purchased from International Film Bureau, Inc., 6 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago 2, Illinois.

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