

staying POWER

Age-Proof Your Home
for Comfort, Safety and Style

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Published by:



Sage Tree Publishing
66 Pantano Dr., Thornhill, Ontario L4J 0B2 Canada
www.sagetreepublishing.com

To order this book, please visit our website.

Managing Editor: Marla Markman

Cover design © 2012, www.leftrightcollaborative.com

Design: Jennifer Rogers Tyson

Interior design: 1106 Design, www.1106design.com

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Printed in the United States of America

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Adelson, Rachel

Staying power : age-proof your home for comfort, safety and style / Rachel Adelson.

Includes index.

Issued also in electronic format.

ISBN 978-0-9878136-0-2

1. Older people--Dwellings. 2. Dwellings--Remodeling. I. Title.

NA7195.A4A34 2012

728.0846

C2012-904481-4

Introduction

Aging: A New Look at an Old Story

For less than the cost of a jar of wrinkle cream, you can get this book and actually *do* something proven to fight aging.

This handbook on healthy, productive aging at home is for you if, like me, you are a baby boomer or someone in the “sandwich generation” who wants to help your parents or other older relatives, friends or neighbors live independently with dignity in their own house or apartment.

It’s also for you if you contemplate having, or already have, older relatives living with you or you live with them. Whether you worry about falls and fires, or simply want to make it easier for your loved ones to carry out their normal daily activities, you’ve come to the right place.

This book is for you, too, if you are noticing that life at home isn’t as easy as it used to be, and you want to

make it work again. Or you are planning ahead, hoping to prevent the injuries and discomfort you've seen other people suffer.

Whether you want to make changes for your own sake or for those you care about, more power to you for facing the need for change forthrightly.

Finally, this book is for the decorators and interior designers, handymen and contractors who work with older people and are in perhaps the best position to help them be safer and more comfortable. Many of you, I've found, take an active interest in this subject—whether it's because you're getting older, you also have parents aging at home, you know it's a growth market or you just plain care about your clients.

Real-estate professionals will find this book useful to help people decide whether to update or sell their homes, and to find new homes that better suit their needs. Geriatric care managers and social workers, home-health aides, occupational and physical therapists, and agencies that specialize in seniors will also find this material of interest.

Staying Power is a response to dramatic growth in the older population. As a society, we are just beginning to experience what it means to have and to house so many old, even very old, people—and we and they are not all going into assisted living, senior housing, retirement communities or nursing homes.

Most people live in their own homes by definition, whether it's the house in which they raised their kids or a post-downsizing house, townhouse, condo or apartment,

owned or rented, developed for and marketed to older people or not. Anywhere you hang your hat is home.

Still, as the generation that once baby-proofed its homes prepares to age-proof the same, it needs to know how to respond to an older person's changing needs for comfort and safety, no matter what type of home. And as so many more of us transition into years, even decades, of potentially significant physical, sensory and cognitive change, we need to know how to help ourselves.

Aging: Consider the Alternative

Self-help starts with self-knowledge, and here, we're in luck. Gerontologists—people who study aging—have given us a great deal of information about the aging process.

To begin with, we know that people age in unique ways, influenced by some combination of genes, environment, and personal and social history. Given identical genes, for example, an 85-year-old woman who was a hungry migrant child in labor camps and didn't go past Grade 3 during the Great Depression may age differently than an 85-year-old woman who was well fed and well educated in a stable suburban home during the post-World War expansion.

The aging process varies in other ways, too. We all know people who were "born old" and those who stay perpetually youthful. Even within a single person, biological age might be lesser or greater than chronological age.

Despite all this variation, the tapestry of human aging has some common threads. For example, many of us get arthritis. We don't all get it, or get it at the same time

or in the same joints, but many of us get it nonetheless because we all have joints and they show wear and tear. Similarly, many of us lose some ability to see, but the cause may vary from cataracts to macular degeneration.

No matter where, when or how we lived our younger days, there are some universals. To some degree, our senses dull; to some degree, we just slow down. On the plus side, we ride life's emotional roller coaster better than young people, have experience to burn and sometimes earn that age-old reputation for wisdom.

What else do we know about aging?

We know that some barriers to productive aging are on the outside. These are the practical and physical barriers that older people confront every day. You may already have noticed some of them: the crossing lights that change too fast, the tiny type on the medicine bottle, those sadistically high steps to climb onto the bus.

With external challenges to a secure and dignified old age growing more obvious, society is finally starting to crank itself up to address them. Yet change on the scale that is needed is likely to be slow. When it comes to public policy, helping the vulnerable tends to be low on the priority list. Meanwhile, we're all getting older. Who can wait?

In addition to external barriers to aging well, there is also an internal barrier—the sense that aging is *yucky* (in fancier terms, somehow repulsive).

The ugly truth is that society has tended to hide or mock old age, ignoring the growing number of people who are active, vital contributors to society well into their

later years. Only recently, thanks to ads for prescription drugs, supplements and retirement funds, are we starting to see more positive images of people with gray hair and wrinkles.

Look, an achy knee is no fun, nor is trying to hear your dinner partner's conversation in today's noisy restaurants. Worse, though, is how those predicaments make us feel about aging. And that creates a double-whammy: Feeling bad *about* aging, on top of feeling bad *because* of aging. And that can send anyone into denial.

Yet denying the changes that come with age can actually make it harder to age well. It's like covering mirrors to get rid of wrinkles. Does. Not. Work. Negative attitudes about aging have even been linked to shorter life spans. In terms of the subject of this book—aging at home—those of us who acknowledge where we are at can more easily stay there in style.

So, make it your personal challenge to overcome the “ick” factor and do something proactive about aging. Knowledge is power. Start by reading this book and making a few simple adjustments around the house, updating it over time.

Graceful or even grateful acceptance of aging can actually help people retain more of the energy and capacity of youth. It turns out that aging well, like so many things, starts in the head.

A Word About “Aging”

Aging is a hot topic—and opinions on what to call it even hotter. Some people prefer the word “seniors” while

others find it condescending. Some view “elderly” as a term of respect. Yet others think it connotes frailty and decay. Even the term “old” is open for debate, now that we must by necessity subdivide that age bracket, itself fairly arbitrary, into smaller and equally fairly arbitrary brackets such as the young-old, the oldest-old and the just plain old.

“Age” is a social construct; so is language. That said, to write this book, I had to use some kind of wording to describe the process of getting older in the way most of us think. I had to talk about old people, presenting “oldness” as a fact and not an insult.

Thus, the terms “older person” for individuals and “older people” for a population will be used, as well as “older adult” for variety and to remind us that older people are adults first, old second. These terms, along with the phrases “aging at home” and “aging in place,” are currently used by respected academic, health and government institutions concerned with the subject of aging.

How to Use This Book

The easy-to-follow advice in *Staying Power* won’t, in most cases, require you to hire a contractor (especially if you are one!), do major remodeling or get a permit, though it will raise those options and refer you to reliable resources.

The focus is on things you can do relatively quickly, without superior strength or elaborate tools. The process won’t cost a million bucks or make your home look like a rehab ward.

Most important, this book will help you figure out how to respond to person-specific, situation-specific needs. To help you personalize your approach, *Staying Power* is organized by need and not by room, with two important exceptions for high-risk problems. Chapter 2, “The Stable Home: Preventing Falls,” will help you prevent the No. 1 cause of accidental injury in older people. Chapter 3, “The Smoke-Free Home: Preventing Fires,” puts the heat on the threat of home fires, an underestimated issue for the elderly.

Begin the journey to aging in place with Chapter 1, “The Thoughtful Home: Design for Living.” Before you run out to the store or so much as change a single light bulb, learn common-sense principles of home safety and function as they apply to getting older. First do your “homework” so you can more wisely, systematically and economically improve any living space.

The rest of this book is dedicated to the nuts and bolts of making an older person’s home a more pleasant, supportive and enriching place, addressing the most typical changes of normal, healthy aging.

Chapter 4, “The Easy Home: Function and Mobility,” explains how to make everyday tasks, such as cooking and washing, easier and less energy-intensive by updating interiors and obtaining the right equipment for ease of use and movement.

Chapter 5, “The Sensitive Home: Eyes, Ears and More,” offers simple, effective ways to compensate for sensory changes, including the less-often-discussed senses of touch, taste and smell.

Chapter 6, “The Holistic Home: Mind and Body,” tells how to use the home environment to minimize the humbling impact of normal aging on the mind and maximize physical activity to boost cognitive abilities along with circulation, strength, flexibility and balance.

Chapter 7, “The Useful Home: Supportive Surroundings,” reviews ways to quickly improve the safety of a home’s outdoor and utility areas and presents a snapshot of emerging domestic technologies.

Chapter 8, “The Possible Home: Getting the Job Done,” details, well, how to get the job of home modifications done and done right.

The Appendix includes a valuable, lengthy and comprehensive list of resources (in both the United States and Canada) and recommended reading, with more in-depth information for consumers and professionals alike. Because aging at home is not the best solution for every older person, some of these resources will help you uncover more suitable alternatives and make sound decisions.

Chapters 2 through 7 include “Let’s Get Started” checklists with top tips for each major area of concern and “Let’s Go Shopping” lists with do-it-yourself age-proofing tools you can find at housewares, hardware and home-health stores.

To keep the book price down, I’ve stuck mostly to text. If you’d like to see any item mentioned, from lever handle to roll-in shower or pocket door, do a quick image search on the Internet or visit a store or supplier (bricks and mortar, or online).

I hope you find this book helpful. My goal is to help you to see aging at home as a creative challenge, a chance to be caring and inventive, and above all an enjoyable way to make your home, or any home, a continued source of independence, vitality and joy.

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