

STAYING POWER FAQ: An Interview with Rachel Adelson, M.A.

1. Why did you write this book?

*I wrote it to meet the needs of the growing number of people who are 65 or older, as well as the needs of the people who care for them, whether formally or informally, down the block or across the country. Elder care is a big topic of conversation among my fellow Baby Boomers. It consumes a lot of time and energy and requires an active response. **Staying Power** is for everyone, with tips on communication to help family members collaborate and take constructive action. You don't have to become an expert on aging; this book can help you "cut to the chase" to help yourself and the people you know.*

2. What drew you to this particular topic?

I've always loved solving practical problems in everyday life – making things comfortable, setting up processes, working with contractors and designers. And in my career, I had the good fortune to write about human factors, ergonomics, Universal Design. When I began taking courses in Aging, it all came together. As a long-time science writer concerned with public health, I knew I could popularize this material and make it accessible to a wide audience.

3. The media is starting to cover aging in place. Why did you think this book was necessary? Can't people find things on the Internet?

Despite the appearance of abundant information, it's actually not easy to cut through the information overload, find the right pieces and fit them together. First, people are busy; they miss things. Second, newspapers and websites have only so much space, resulting in good but superficial advice. "Install a grab bar" isn't the same as "here's how you buy what kind of grab bar, and here's how and where you install it." Third, this book makes it easier to understand how and why the way someone is aging interacts with his or her environment. And it goes problem-by-problem to help folks respond to specific situations. It's more personal.

*As for going on the Web, you still have to find credible sources. When writing **Staying Power**, I consulted experts on everything from arthritis and hearing loss to fire prevention, care management and elder fraud. I'm very grateful that they took the time to make this book something readers can trust. And it's designed to be easy to read and to navigate, with clear headings and slightly larger type. Finally, Web pages are filled with distractions – something that anyone in midlife or older finds it hard to tune out (see Chapter Six!).*

4. Aren't there other books on this subject? What makes *Staying Power* different?

*Although there are terrific books on building and renovating for age and disability, not everyone is in a position to undertake a move or major project. **Staying Power** is for these other people, who are equally concerned and probably more typical. It's an affordable primer that touches all the bases of aging, for people who want to quickly learn core concepts and get things done fairly easily and inexpensively. And it's portable. You can carry it around, use the checklists and share it. Or if you like reading on a digital reader, **Staying Power** is also available as an e-book. That's new.*

5. What are the top three misconceptions about aging in place?

When I ran a small pilot survey about aging in place a few years back, people were rightfully concerned about falls but underestimated the risk of fire. So maybe that's one. Another could be that age-proofing is expensive. It doesn't have to be, and larger projects might still be cheaper than moving. Yet another might be that age-proofing is ugly and looks "medical." In reality, age-proofed homes can be extremely attractive because they're well thought out, easy to use, and easy on the senses. Rooms that 'make sense' tend to feel good.

6. Why is independence so important to today's older people? Why does the subject of aging raise so much conflict?

As the book title makes clear, this issue cuts to the heart of *Staying Power*. Independence is central to today's older people because it's been a core value for that generation. They made it through a Great Depression and a devastating World War; dependency is not a part of their self-concept. Let's admire that and work with it. Meanwhile, it would be unwise to say that Baby Boomers are going to be big babies. We're all grown up; we've worked and raised children. I think it's more that independence, mastery, control over your life are essential psychological needs for people of any age.

Conflict comes with the inability to recognize the need for change that can support independence or with all-or-nothing thinking that has people turning down any sort of help, however small. They're afraid it's the beginning of the end, but it really isn't – and refusing help when it is needed can be self-defeating. Maybe as old age becomes more mainstream and less marginalized, we'll be less negative and get down to the practical business of meeting the mammoth social, medical and logistical needs caused by this population shift.

7. Isn't caregiving more of a women's issue? Do you think men will buy your book?

First, let's separate "caregiving" from "age-proofing." The former implies hands-on care with activities of daily living, whether bathing or paying the bills. Age-proofing has to do with adapting the home over time to support safety, comfort and higher function. Although women and men can do both equally well, women have definitely been much more involved in caregiving – sometimes to the point of sacrificing their employment and their health. Still, change is afoot! More men are taking on a caregiving role, whether out of necessity or by choice.

So will men buy *Staying Power*? I hope so; after all, they need help, too. They may be comfortable with the kind of hands-on, "how to" problem-solving advice found in the book. Men (and women) may appreciate that I'm not a touchy-feely writer. I tend to use humor to make points.

8. Why did you add the focus on fitness? Doesn't that belong on the Health & Wellness shelf?

The World Health Organization defines "health" as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." This broader, 360-degree view reinforces the importance of staying mentally and physically strong through the years. Older people shouldn't just feel grateful that they made it through another day without a stroke or heart attack. They should be able to actively enjoy their lives and participate in community life to the best of their abilities. So prevent falls, certainly. But also make sure you can play with your grandkids.

9. Isn't "cognitive aging" a little too technical for a book about grab bars?

We all worry about dementia and its most common form, Alzheimer's disease – both how to prevent it in ourselves and how to spot trouble in our loved ones. How do we know what's typical? What can we do when we experience 'normal' forgetfulness? What can we do to keep our brains healthy? These questions, and most of the activities needed for good brain health, are going to happen at home. After all, our nervous systems live there just the same as our hearts and hands. It would have been remiss to leave out this information.

10. What are your top three recommendations for people who are considering modifying their home environments so they can age in place?

This is easy. Number One: fix the floors. Pick up the rugs and anything else that can be tripped over. Reduce glare and, where possible, make floors and walkways less slippery. Ensure smooth transitions between rooms. Number Two: improve the lighting. Make sure it's even, a little brighter, and consistent throughout the house, reducing shadows and minimizing glare. Number Three: install one or two grab bars in the tub or shower enclosure. Even if you're feeling strong now, they work great when you get soap in your eye.

11. Do you really put friction tape on your stairs?

I do! In high school, when I was a serious street-handball player in great shape, I fell 13 steps while taking out the garbage and broke my tailbone. Believe me, an accident like that will sensitize you to the pain and lasting problems caused by falls. So in our former house (we recently moved), I put friction tape on the slick, painted basement stairs and installed a second, more secure hand rail on the opposite side of a flimsy pre-existing rail. In our current house, the main stairs to the second floor are dark, so I put contrasting white safety treads on the bottom three steps. They prevented a potentially serious fall recently when my husband had a passing problem with his eyesight.

12. What are you going to do now that your book is out?

Get all the recommended exercise that I passed up so I could sit at the computer and get this done. It was hard to write about the value of fitness and not pursue it myself. Clearly, I'm part of the target market for the book.

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