

# THE NEW SENIOR MOMENT

By Gene D. Cohen, MD, PhD

Something that really annoys me is when a narrow world view is considered accurate, especially when the particular world in question is aging, a realm I have studied for more than three decades. A classic example is the misinformed idea held by the general public and scientists alike for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—that we have all our brain cells by the age of 3, with no capacity to produce new ones thereafter.

From this misinformation, it was concluded that the stage for a gradual downward course was set early in the life cycle. We now know that this is false; we continue to have the capacity to produce new brain cells right to the end of life, a process known as *neurogenesis*. Moreover, brain scientists have found that neurogenesis in aging is associated with novelty and ingenuity.

Consider, too, the concept of the “senior moment.” When an older person experiences a “tip-of-the-tongue” phenomenon—having trouble finding the right word—too many shoot from the hip that he or she is having a senior moment, as if that handily captures the essence of aging. But what moment do adolescents have when arriving at the supermarket and realizing they forgot the shopping list their mother stressed that they remember to bring? Does the so-called senior moment really reflect the defining moment for a senior any more than forgetfulness should brand an absent-minded teenager?

In contrast, my research and clinical work with more than 3,500 individuals in the second half of life has identified not a characteristic moment that defines aging but a considerable interval of time where remarkable psychological growth and development occur. This sets the stage for what may be called the *new senior moment*, a time of life which many older individuals experience as their “moment,” a new period in their life where they shine or come into their own.

I describe it as the liberation phase. During this phase, positive events happen not despite aging but because of it. Along with the experience of years come agile thought forms, reflecting a mature psychological development prominent among those in their late 50s, 60s, and 70s. With age can come a feeling of inner freedom,

self-confidence, and liberation from social constraints that allows for novel or bold behavior, and this lays the inner foundation for the new senior moment.

I’ve identified four psychological growth phases in the second half of life. They overlap one another, phasing in as we transition from one to the other. For example, in our mid-50s, we enter the liberation phase, which continues to be prominent throughout our 60s and as we move into our 70s. It is, in effect, characterized by friendly metaphorical inner voices saying to us, “If not now, when? Why not? What can they do to me?” These voices give us a new level of comfort, confidence, and courage to try different approaches in exploring new areas of endeavor, problem solving, and tapping into our limitless inventive potential. The liberation phase underlies what many researchers have called the growth of practical intelligence and pragmatic creativity with aging. Consider the following real-life story:

My in-laws, Howard and Gisele Miller, both in their 70s, were stuck. They had just emerged from the Washington, DC, subway system into a driving snowstorm. They were coming to our house for dinner and needed a cab since it was too far to walk. But it was rush hour, and no cabs stopped. Howard tried calling us, but both my wife, Wendy, and I were tied up in traffic and weren’t home yet—this was the pre-cell phone era.

As his fingers began to turn numb, Howard noticed a pizza shop across the street. He and Gisele walked through the slush to it and ordered a large pizza for home delivery. When the cashier asked where to deliver it, Howard gave him our address, and added, “Oh, there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?” the cashier asked.

“We want you to deliver us with it,” Howard said.

And that’s how they arrived, pizza in hand, for dinner that night.

This favorite family story perfectly illustrates the sort of agile creativity that can accompany the aging mind. Would a younger person have thought of this solution? Possibly. But in my experience, this kind of out-of-the-box thinking is a learned trait that improves with age. Age allows our brains to accumulate a repertoire of strategies developed from a lifetime of experience, part of what other researchers have termed *crystallized intelligence*. Obviously, Howard hadn’t used that pizza routine before, but the accumulated experience of other successful strategies helped stimulate the thinking that produced his creative resolution. This was one of his new senior moments, occurring, again, not as a failing of aging, but a benefit of it.

— Gene D. Cohen, MD, PhD, is the founding director of the Center on Aging, Health & Humanities at George Washington University. He’s a past president of the Gerontological Society of America and, during his 20-year career at the National Institutes of Health, was appointed the first chief of the Center on Aging at the National Institute of Mental Health and served as acting director of the National Institute on Aging. In 2000, he published *The Creative Age*, a book on creativity and aging, and in 2006, published *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*.