

The Stages of Aging

This is an overview of the five stages of aging. Now that we're clear they exist, we can focus on the more interesting and entertaining aspects of growing older. Where are you along the continuum of stages? How soon you notice age-related changes in stamina, strength, or sensory perception will vary based on your personal health choices, your medical history, and your genetics.

We shouldn't think of aging as a failure of our bodily systems, says Kenneth Minaker, MD, chief of geriatric medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. "Aging is a life-saving process," he says. Natural changes in cells may slow them down or alter their capacity. He says most people reach their peak functioning at around age 30.

First Stage: Self-Sufficient and Self-Reliant

If you live with chronic conditions, you manage them independently, without help and assistance from others. You thrive on independence and it's the best time to assess your place and community. Can it support you throughout the significant changes of aging? It's the time to evaluate your health, the types of care you may need down the road, and how to pay for them. You will want to get your legal documents in order if you have not by now.

Second Stage: Relying on Others for Assistance

If you live alone, you should have built a team of friends and family to call on for help. You may experience a decline in independence and need help with meal planning, cleaning, and transportation.

Third stage: Becoming Dependent

People in this stage of the aging process require assistance with activities of daily living. They need help with meal preparation, cleaning, shopping, transportation, and help with dressing, bathing, and grooming.

Fourth stage: Finding Ourselves in Crisis Management

Hiring an in-home caregiver may not be enough. A person at this stage may need to live in a residential care home.

Fifth stage: Requiring Nursing Care and Extensive Assistance

This is the phase that's called the final stage. At this time in their lives, people require the help of a nursing home facility. Skilled nursing care and extensive personal care assist the person to live with dignity.