



## Young at Heart

THE SECRET TO AGING WELL MAY BE PRETENDING THAT YOU'RE NOT AGING AT ALL.

**SEVENTY-YEAR-OLD** Stuart Burney acts, teaches, and practices karate. “I feel 25,” he says. “Sometimes I feel 13.” Aside from hearing more “sirs” and noticing his thinning hair, he never really thought of himself as 70—until he went to an audition and was paired with a woman who reminded him of his 90-year-old mother. “I didn’t realize that’s my age group,” he says.

Burney’s feelings are hardly unique. A trio of studies in *Psychology and Aging* suggests that we often resist seeing ourselves as old—for good reason. Ideas about seniors—weakened bodies, loss of mental faculties—become ingrained in our psyches when we’re still young and spry. When we (ineluctably) age, we risk conforming to our own low expectations and using stereotypes as excuses. “I skipped the gym today because I’m tired” becomes “I skipped the gym today because I’m old.”

But while aging is unavoidable, succumbing to long-held stereotypes about what that means is not. People who have the most pessimistic views about old age are, in fact, the most likely to resist seeing themselves as

elderly—an attitude that can help stave off the very things they fear. University of Zurich researchers found that older adults who psychologically distance themselves from their own age group feel younger and perceive their future as more open-ended.

Diane Rodriguez, 58, says she and her husband surround themselves with friends in their early 40s, which helps them act—and feel—“younger than some people younger than we are.”

No one wants to be lumped into an unappealing stereotype. “There’s a lack of a sense of the older person as a full human being, even though our bodies change considerably more than our personalities,” says Andrew Scharlach, a professor of aging at the University of California, Berkeley. “It’s important to focus on individual differences,” agrees University of Zurich psychologist David Weiss, “not to view oneself as just part of this elderly group.”

For many seniors, the illusion of youth is not harmful or misguided—it’s protective. “They think: ‘I’m not old—old people are old!’” says Weiss. “I’m the exception.”

—Mary Diduch