

**HEALTHY MINDS**  
**A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS**  
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**The Changing Nature of Long-Term Care**



As “baby boomers” – defined as those citizens born in the post-WWII era from about 1945 to 1964 – continue to age, they are entering the stage of human development sometimes called old age. Statistics tell us that the section of society over 65 is the one growing faster than all others, and thus it may be said that America is becoming a place of older people.

Our healthcare and long-term care infrastructure is not keeping pace with this rapid increase in elderly population. According to a recent article in the Boston Globe, baby boomers, despite their increased awareness of healthy lifestyles – their more sensible diets, their pre-occupation with living longer healthier lives – the evidence seems to point towards a declining level of vitality as compared with their parents. They may look younger, don’t smoke cigarettes, and keep a low cholesterol count, but they tire more easily from such everyday activities such as climbing stairs or even the simple act of rising to their feet from a sitting position. Furthermore, despite the healthy diet they suffer more from chronic ailments such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and elevated cholesterol.

Some of these startling discoveries can be explained by increased need to work, a more sedentary lifestyle, increased fast food consumption, and a greater use of prescription drugs, cited as the third biggest killer of the elderly, and the stressful times in which we live. An article in U.S. News and World Report suggests that boomers – and the rest of us – quit smoking, develop a strong social support network, eat healthy food in moderation, practice yoga or meditation, take fish oil supplements, take supplements of resveratrol, and reduce their intake of calories.

The strain on the healthcare system by the rapid increase of aging boomers has caught the attention of many in the managed care industry. Because they are a sizeable voting block, they will get much support from lawmakers as they try to increase benefits, services, and widen coverage for the growing number of multiple chronic illnesses. With a shrinking economy, and many boomers having lost much of their retirement funds to market fluctuations and manipulations, the effect on the ability of the federal government, and the ability to maintain supplemental insurance, will create complex and perhaps very difficult problems for boomers, and for society in general.

In another 20 years or so, there will be a large population of boomers in their 80s, facing the frailties of very old age. Health Services Research sponsored a study

in order to predict economic and social service necessities in order to plan ahead. They found that it will be necessary to develop better payment and insurance procedures now in order to meet the heightened future demands; they stated the need to use current advances in medicine and lifestyle changes now, to lessen the future health impact; they called for a restructuring of community services to increase their accessibility, and; implement a public relations campaign to redefine aging in order to make the elderly a more integrated part of the community at large.

Our society faces many problems now. As the next several years develop we shall see how it all will unfold. We cannot predict the future but we can understand the possible scenarios we face. If we act wisely, and outside forces don't work against us, we who care, and who may be in a helping profession, can work towards an outcome most favorable to us, our loved ones, and to our world.

**Tip of the week:** If you are stressed out by having a lot of things to do and feel overwhelmed by your tasks, make a list of everything you have to do and keep it where you can see it regularly – like on a big sheet of paper on your fridge, or on a white board or blackboard you might have hanging, or on your computer. It is so much easier to get things done when you can see them all laid out in front of you.