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Cohen Says Creativity Is Key to Senior Health.

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COHEN SAYS CREATIVITY IS KEY TO SENIOR HEALTH

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Picture Profile

Gerontologist Gene Cohen's new book recommends taking advantage of the freedom that comes with retirement to nurture undiscovered creative talents of older Americans.

Gene D. **Cohen's** field is geriatrics, and he's one of the world's experts. He heads the Center on Aging, **Health** and the Humanities at George Washington University in the nation capital and has been president of the Gerontological Society of America. In 1996, **Cohen** received the Jack Weinberg Memorial Award for geriatric psychiatry from the American Psychiatric Association; he is listed in Best Doctors in America.

In his most recent book, *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, **Cohen** writes about the evidence that it never too late for **creativity**. His major concern is the need he sees for American society to create an infrastructure that awakens within the aging the varieties of possibility in later life, something he believes we now fail to do.

Cohen is no Pollyanna. He is a physician who deals directly with aging and all the myriad and serious problems it raises. His own father suffered from Alzheimer's disease. "In later life," he tells *Insight*, "there is much serious loss, but there also is the necessity and opportunity to deal with that loss." In the challenge to transcend loss, he sees the chance for the old (or anyone of any age, for that matter) to tap into the creative resources available to all humans from birth.

Insight: What do you mean when you **say** the country lacks an infrastructure to help the aging understand the possibilities before them?

Gene D. Cohen: There really is no infra structure to help people reevaluate what they might do in later life. The only kind of organized guidance is financial planning. In all other parts of life, there's an infrastructure to help people explore their talents and interests. For example, there are all kinds of programs for young children to sample this and to try that.

The process of education [as the young mature] is exposure to different ideas and ways of thinking. Throughout the whole experience in the workplace there are all sorts of on-the-job

education, constant exposure through exploring new skills and staying up with the state of the art. But all of this ends with retirement, in part because large numbers of retirees are a recent phenomenon. We didn't pass age 50 in life expectancy until the 20th century.

Insight: You see the issues raised in your book as part of a second major change in attitudes toward aging.

GDC: The first change came in the early- to mid-1970s. The conceptual turning point that was occurring was that many of the changes people explained as due to aging were for the first time being questioned as maybe not representing aging but as problems resulting from diseases that occur in later life.

That was a profound turn because until you define something as a problem to be overcome, you often think of it as your destiny. But at that time the sense of potential for later life was not even on the radar screen. Now, in addition to our ongoing progress in dealing with problems [presented by age], we have a sense of potential.

Insight: Your book is filled with examples of people who have transcended loss successfully.

GDC: Grandma Moses is a story of dealing with loss twice. She lost her husband at 67 and it was very traumatic. In dealing with that she took up embroidery. She did that for 11 years but, by the time she reached 78, she had arthritis. The physical loss was to the point she no longer could do the embroidery with the quality that she demanded of herself, but she found she still could paint. That's when she launched a 23-year career as a painter, until she was 101.

Insight: But we're not all Grandma Moseses; we're not all exceptional artists.

GDC: It's not just for artists and geniuses. You look at kids, they start rearranging pillows and chairs to form houses and wagons. Their whole activity is **creativity** in motion. In later life, there are many who have this new freedom, a kind of what-the-hell attitude, and **creativity** that's been submerged often is liberated.

Insight: Among the many things you recommend to help integrate the elderly into family and community is the creation of a video autobiography by whatever creative means comes to mind.

GDC: When people are getting into their later years, they go into what I describe as "the summing-up days." I feel it's part of the life cycle. It's a period of looking back, taking stock, and that typically makes people feel that they want to give back and share. This often takes forms of storytelling, autobiography, sharing information.

In the process of looking back there's also the question of unfinished business, and that too can give a boost to further creative activity. It's a powerful dynamic.

The autobiography is a wonderful activity to get involved with. Families love it. You can do this in an intergenerational way; a production, with younger members doing the videos. Documentary.

Dialogues. Genealogy. You can concentrate on a year in the person's life, on a decade, if the whole life seems overwhelming.

Laura Ingalls Wilder started writing in her mid-sixties, and what she wrote about her past led to the Little House on the Prairie series, all of those wonderful descriptions of pioneer life in the 19th century, so both her family and society benefited from the stories she told.

This is what happens in the summing-up phase. People not only have a chance to talk about their accomplishments but also about their rough times and the adversity that they dealt with, the approaches they used. There are many lessons to be learned and they remind themselves of their own achievements. It's a really rich source that we've left untapped.

Insight: And this works?

GDC: We recently interviewed an elderly woman who was not responding. We have a control, something from TV such as segments from the Today show, that we play on the VCR. She watched it but didn't move, didn't **say** a word and then her husband showed her the video biography that he had developed and the reaction was extraordinary. She verbalized things. She turned to her husband and put her hands on his cheek.

They're not all that dramatic. That one was quite extraordinary, but all the families have been very, very pleased with how [the videos and biographies] have gone. They really get into it.

Insight: What can families expect from stimulating the creative side of the old?

GDC: Short of prevention or cure, the hope is that there will be an intervention that will delay the onset [of Alzheimer's and other debilitation] and, right now, if you delay the onset just five years it cuts the incidence in half. That alone would be a significant impact and it's something that is possible within the next 20 years. But Alzheimer's is a big problem and the numbers are huge and growing.

There are other benefits. Old people benefit by feeling better. What the research is showing is that people who are productive and creative do better healthwise. Even couch potatoes who are involved in productive activities have better **health**.

Behavioral scientists point out that there are activities that give you a sense of mastery, a sense of control, and have a very positive effect on your well-being. Those who study brain-behavior relationships find that people who experience that sense of mastery and of control have a positive feedback on the immune system. Good **health** means becoming more independent and less of a burden on society.

The elderly need to feel that they can contribute. The most recent example of a sensible response to this phenomenon is the elimination of the penalty for working while receiving Social Security. Older people have good motivation [at work], high morale. They steal less. They have fewer sick days than people in their fifties.

And there is the wisdom of the old. You see the role of older people in diplomacy, as judges. These have always been areas where the role of older persons is both strong and respected. It's the result of wisdom, which I see as a combination of conventional knowledge, a buildup of life experiences, and of emotional intelligence that the young have not yet developed but from which they can benefit.

Insight: Still, aren't there cases beyond our help and reach? How many old folks are going to be able to arouse their creative potential?

GDC: Oh, people will **say**, "Emily--in no way can she be creative! She's not one of those people! She's a very miserable, unhappy person! No way!" And yet every Christmas for 150 years our culture has celebrated the ability of the elderly to get out of a rut -- the case of Ebenezer Scrooge.

I think most people don't look at it this way, but A Christmas Carol is really the story of an older man, probably in his 70s, who's suffering a depression that has not been diagnosed. Then he becomes the fortunate beneficiary of a home visit -- more than 100 years before the community-**health** program. So here they are using psychodynamic dream work in 1843 -- 50 years before Freud wrote his classic work. They do this and mm it all around. It's a wonderful story of how it's fundamentally never too late to change.

Personal Bio

Gene D. Cohen: Enjoying a stogie with George Burns (left).

Born: Sept. 28, 1944, Boston.

Career: The first director of the Center on Aging, **Health** and Humanities, founded in 1994 at George Washington University; founding director of the Washington Center on Aging, a think tank; author of The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life.

Family: Wife, Wendy Miller; two children: Alex and Eliana.

Education: Harvard College, A.B., 1966; Georgetown University School of Medicine, M.D.; The Union Institute, Ph.D. in gerontology.

Inventions: Has patents for three board games that provide mental exercises and user-friendliness for older adults: "WW III," a game of word wars; and "The Essential Cribbage Board" and "Tic Tac Phone," each produced by GENCO. About the first of these, he **says**: "Since I hold the patent on `WW III,' it is now illegal for any person or country to declare WW III."

PHOTOS (COLOR): Gene D. **Cohen**

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Text by Stephen Goode

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