

JOYSPAN

THE ART
AND SCIENCE
OF THRIVING IN
LIFE'S SECOND HALF

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Introduction

People ask all the time: What's Betty's secret?

Betty is my ninety-six-year-old mother. She lives on her own, is as sharp as ever, belly-laughs with friends, and never forgets a birthday or condolence card. Family, neighbors—even strangers—can't get enough of her.

But here's the thing—Betty has never been particularly athletic, enjoys dessert, sips the occasional cocktail, and is the first to admit she didn't always have the best attitude when she was younger. So how is she thriving in her later years?

Spoiler alert: It's not her genes and it's not just luck.

Her secret isn't perfect health or a life free from hardship. In fact, it's not a secret at all—it's science.

As a gerontologist, I've spent decades researching the factors that enable people to thrive in the second half of life. In this book, I share the proven strategies that have helped Betty maximize well-being in longevity—and that will help you do the same.

When we talk about longevity, we often focus on lifespan—how long we live—or healthspan—how many of those years are in good health. But what's the point of a long, healthy life if you're not enjoying it?

That's where joyspan comes in—the key to a fulfilling long life. It's about more than just physical health; it's about cultivating internal strength—the ability to grow, connect, adapt, and give, all life long.

We are all aging. Whether you're twenty-three or a hundred and three, the best time to invest in your joyspan is right now.

Let's get started.

A NEW WAY TO LOOK AT AGE

Anyone who says, "Age is just a number," has not reached the high numbers. Aging is not easy, and "forever young" is not a plan. Regardless of how many burpees you can do or protein smoothies you chug, the passing of time brings challenges. Roles that you relished change, words on the menus seem to shrink, necks sag, diagnoses arise.

On the other hand, aging is not the downhill slide that people believe it is. A multibillion-dollar antiaging industry profits when you feel awful about yourself and fear aging like the plague. The tragedy of aging is not that we will all grow old and die, but that aging has been made unnecessarily, and at times excruciatingly, painful and humiliating. Aging does not have to be this way. When it comes to longevity, the primary focus has been upon lifespan, the length of life.

More recently, the scope has expanded beyond years of life to *years of life in good health*, or healthspan. This is a welcomed shift, because we all want to live as healthy as possible for as long as possible.

But there's a catch. A long life, even a long life in good health, doesn't mean much if you don't like your life. As geriatrician Dr. Louise Aronson observes, "We've added a couple of decades, essentially an entire generation, onto our lives, and we haven't figured out how to handle that."¹

What we've been missing is a practical vocabulary and approach to maximizing the quality of our long lives. We need a science-based, how-to guide for creating long lives characterized by inner well-being. It's not enough to have a long lifespan and healthspan; we want what I call a long *joyspan*.

WHAT IS JOYSPAN?

Joyspan is the experience of well-being and satisfaction in longevity. Because the focus is upon well-being, I tried out the term “wellspan” with my patients. After more than a few people thought I was saying, “wealthspan,” I started calling it “joyspan”—it’s been a perfect fit. The American Psychological Association defines *joy* as the feeling that arises from a sense of well-being or satisfaction. Experiencing joy is different from feeling happy. Happiness comes and goes and is often dependent on external circumstances. Joy can be experienced even in adverse situations. More akin to contentment than to ecstasy, joy may show up in the form of a smile, but many times it does not. You cannot always ascertain someone’s joy by observing them. One older woman looking at the trees through her window may be lonely and miserable, while a different older woman looking at the same trees may be experiencing great joy.

My mother, Betty, is enjoying a long joyspan. She practices what I preach: a research-based, proven approach to maximize well-being in longevity. Joyspan requires knowledge, intention, and effort and is achievable regardless of where you are starting out today. Your current approach to longevity is no doubt incomplete. In everyday media we are inundated with advice on maximizing physical fitness, but very little on how to maximize internal fitness and emotional well-being. Joyspan brings to light the robust research findings on psychological well-being, which are too often tucked away in academic journals. This book is what you need but have been missing.

To thrive in old age means to live a fulfilling, purposeful, and satisfying life despite the challenges that accompany aging. It involves maximizing physical health, cognitive function, emotional well-being, social connections, and a sense of meaning. Thriving doesn’t mean being free of all health problems or challenges; rather, it emphasizes resilience, adaptability, and the ability to find joy and value in

life. People don't thrive in longevity by mistake or luck. People who thrive in longevity actively maximize the quality of their lives. But how? What does the research say about HOW to thrive in life's second half? As a gerontologist, I scoured the findings of thirty-five years of empirical testing on psychological well-being in longevity. The research was conducted by experts from around the globe and points to hundreds of predictors. But the deeper I dug into the findings, the more I recognized a profound underlying pattern. The hundreds of predictors found in thousands of studies on what is necessary to thrive in longevity consistently group into four essential elements. The research showed that people with long joyspans actively commit to four critical actions:

- **Grow:** They continue to explore and expand.
- **Connect:** They put time into new and existing relationships.
- **Adapt:** They adjust to changing and challenging situations.
- **Give:** They share themselves.

Each of these elements is nonnegotiable for well-being in longevity, and you can improve in each area. Joyspan matters because without it, a long life is a drag.

MY PATH TO JOYSPAN

When I completed my PhD thirty years ago, I was in the oxymoronic position of being the youngest doctor of gerontology in the country. To me it made perfect sense—in fact, it felt like I was born a gerontologist. To start out, I came as a surprise to my middle-aged parents and my siblings, who were high school age. I was the only four-year-old in preschool whose sister was married. When kids made fun of old people, it felt personal to me. Sometimes I'd ride out the jabs in

silence; other times I'd stand up for my people: the gray, the wrinkled, and the fabulous.

I taught geriatric medicine and gerontology for nineteen years at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine. At UCI's Senior Health Center, I had a front-row seat to observe people, and their families, navigate old age. What struck me most was the radical differences in how people experienced their own aging process. For some, it is a frustrating, degrading, painful trajectory of ever-increasing decline. For others, there is visible delight, spirituality, and joy in occupying their eighth, ninth, and tenth decades.

The vast majority of my career has focused upon the former group, those suffering in old age. What I've seen has burned my eyes and left scars on my heart. Blue-eyed Mrs. C., who endured searing physical pain and profound loneliness. Proud Mr. R., who had to choose between needed medication and a meal. Miss T., who cared lovingly for her brother with Down syndrome until she developed Alzheimer's disease, and the two were found in conditions that haunt me to this day.

Dr. Laura Mosqueda is my mentor, friend, and a gifted geriatrician. She and I had the privilege of creating and codirecting the nation's first Elder Abuse Forensic Center, which investigates cases of elder abuse. What we learned from thousands of cases of elder abuse and neglect is that no one is immune to finding themselves in dire situations in old age.

We learned that loneliness kills, and that isolation is a key risk factor. We came to understand that neglect and mistreatment don't occur just in dilapidated shacks, but also behind the closed doors of beautiful homes. Suffering in old age is not a "they" problem; it's an "us" problem. We found that after the abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation occurs, it is the older adult who feels shame instead of the perpetrator—which is heartbreaking and infuriating. Other times, there is no one at fault, only an awful no-win situation with suffering all around.

Many days I drove home from work in tears, my blouse doubling as a tissue. Laura and I received the National Crime Victims' Service Award from the US attorney general, and though I should have been proud, I remember feeling awful on the flight home. I had an image of myself sitting at the base of a skateboard ramp. I was doing my best to bandage up people when they hit the elder abuse pavement at the end of the ramp, but scars and suffering remained. I realized that the real goal was to get to the top of that skateboard ramp and provide people with the equipment they needed for the experiences of later life.

The purpose of this book is to fortify you and those you love for these unprecedented long lives. I want you to thrive during your entire life.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

I've divided *Joyspan* into three sections.

Part 1 explains why your joyspan matters. Chapter 1 defines joyspan and highlights joyspanners who have preceded you. Chapters 2 and 3 delve into how joyspan affects your lifespan and healthspan.

Part 2 explains what you need to do to strengthen your joyspan. Chapter 4 is a deep dive into the first essential element of joyspan, lifelong growth. Chapter 5 provides practical information on how to create and strengthen your community and connection in the second half of life. In chapter 6 you will learn how adaptability contributes to joyspan and how to maximize your adaptability. Chapter 7 shows how giving back unlocks your life purpose and provides meaning.

Part 3 reveals how to create your joyspan for a life you will enjoy living all the way to the end. Chapter 8 shows you how to fill your joytank, while chapter 9 gives you the tools you'll need when your joyspan dips. I examine common struggles such as feeling like a burden, mobility and health obstacles, and loss.

Within each of the three parts, you'll see recurring elements. *Joyspanners* are mini-profiles of adults embodying the elements of joyspan. *Joy Practices* offer activities and exercises to go deeper into your exploration of what creates a long joyspan. Finally, *Joyspan Matrices* are examples of how real people are applying the four elements of joyspan.

I've been thinking about old age for a long time. Thirty-three years ago, I wrote this poem in response to my English professor's prompt: "What do you care about?" What I cared about, what I still care about, was older people. The poem, called "We Are They," ends this way:

Yet somehow, we row closer still, toward the mighty river's end.

The moans they are among us now, at last we understand.

We are they, and we can make choices now, here in gentler tides, while we are miles up the river.

What I want you to gain from reading this book is hope. A good and joyful second half of life is an inside job. Just as the physical self is made up of cells, the inner self is made up of thoughts. According to the National Research Foundation, humans have around sixty thousand thoughts per day. Like cells, thoughts are often small and seemingly innocuous. Taken together, however, thoughts become the inner self. As we grow older, we can't hide behind a fresh face or body. The inner self takes center stage, and it can be glorious. I know because I've seen the radiance of joyspan in thousands of older adults. I want that for you.

About the Author

Dr. Kerry Burnight is on a mission to make older better. She taught geriatric medicine and gerontology for eighteen years at the University of California, Irvine, School of Medicine. She is the cofounder of the nation's first Elder Abuse Forensic Center and founder of TheGerontologist.com. She was an invited speaker to the White House at the Elder Justice Summit, and at the U.S. Department of Justice. She has appeared on *CBS News*, *NBC News*, *The Doctors*, *Money Matters*, and *Dr. Phil* and has been the keynote speaker at hundreds of conferences. She's known as "America's Gerontologist" for optimizing dignity, health, and joy in longevity through her research, teaching, podcasts, blogs, Instagram, X, Facebook, and TikTok.

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