

CHAPTER 1 *Getting the Message:
Stay Young
and Beautiful*

Our society sells “youth” to us daily on the streets, on newsstands, on the radio, on our television screens, and even in casual conversations. Listen carefully to hear a quiet inner voice even now that says, “Stay young and beautiful if you want to be loved.” A song on that subject was written in 1933, and the message is even more pervasive in our culture today. Many women in our society have adopted this as their theme song. They fear that by aging they will lose it all, and they feel ever more anxious because they do not know exactly what “it” is.

Women tell us they feel guilty without knowing why. Many of us are scared of being perceived as old. We are embarrassed and conceal what’s happening to us, and then we judge ourselves and one another harshly. We second-guess ourselves: “Maybe I have not done enough, or tried hard enough, or prayed enough to stay young and beautiful.” We feel guilty about our age and then feel guilty about feeling guilty. It’s a classic no-win situation.

The crucial question for all women who are getting older (please note: this is all living women) is: What is left for women if they have tried everything? What if they have bought all the products, gone under the knife, swallowed all the youth-producing elixirs, pounded the gym floor, and cycled until our buns of steel cramped — and we still look and feel older?

Are we destined to become laughable, like the greeting cards that show aging women in ridiculous costumes? Are we left only with sadness, like the pitiful older women in pharmaceutical ads? Absolutely not!

WHAT THIS BOOK CAN DO

Women do not have to suffer alone, and this book intends to provide support and encouragement. It will show that many others share the same fears and

concerns about growing older in a society that takes a dim view of aging. It is a guide to the changes women experience through each decade of life, told in women's own stories. It can help women overcome their isolation and feel connected to each other.

We invite women to start with the chapter for the age they are now, read the decade they will graduate into, and read about their daughters and mothers. For those who want more depth and detail, there's information about the WomenSpeak research and history of women. This is not intended to become a chore. Instead, we hope it will be a resource that helps women to feel good about their lives. By reading how other women handle their fears, relationships, health, and finances, women can imagine and create for themselves confident, fulfilled, and happy lives.

This is important. Women do not need to feel guilty about losing that youthful bloom, and we do not need to feel that we have failed when gravity exerts its inevitable influence on our bodies. This is a natural process that eventually happens to all of us, especially as each generation lives a little bit longer than the one before it.

Women can and do have wonderful lives as we get older and we can teach each other how to enjoy and glory in every year of our lives. This book — and the years of research that support it — came about because women don't talk honestly with each other about aging. Because we are embarrassed, many women won't talk about their personal aging concerns at all. We have been trained to believe that revealing our messy interior landscape is poor manners, so we have kept our fears locked away.

As researchers, we have found that when women are given the chance to talk about how they feel — with people who truly believe their thoughts and concerns matter — they open up. When women truly feel safe and let down their hair to tell their truths, they get *really* serious — and very verbal. In fact, once they start talking they have trouble stopping.

Women told us they are surprised and thrilled to be asked to talk about their fears and concerns about growing older. They tell us they want their lives to be different. We know from the candid women who took part in our research that about half of women of all ages are fearful and feel unprepared to meet the challenges of growing older. We also found the other half doesn't seem to have much trouble and takes it in stride.

This gave us the idea for this book. Women of every age who struggle with getting older need help. Why don't we team up and share the secrets of success so we can all age successfully and feel youthful at any age? Most of our mothers gave us little guidance about aging beyond telling us to accept it or ignore it.

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Why don't we team up to share and learn each other's secrets so we can all age successfully and feel youthful at any age?

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Today, in an entrenched beauty culture that worships the appearance of youth, women need to talk about the realities of aging and learn from each other how to cope. We all deserve lives that are rich in experience and feelings of satisfaction. By telling our truths we can add quality years to our lives. That's what this book intends to do.

THE VELVET ANCHOR HOLDS US DOWN

Recently I spoke to a group of young women preparing for their master's and doctoral degrees in clinical psychology. I was surprised to hear they did not feel supported by their female professors. They yearned for female mentors and someone to show them the way. They said the problem for women today is less the glass ceiling of the 1970s than what they called the "Velvet Anchor." These women said, "The problem is not so much the ceiling above us; what's worse is all the things that hold us down."

The Velvet Anchor is all the soft, silken, subtle, and in many cases subconscious, ideas we believe about what it means to be a woman. Today these ideas hold us down as much — or more — than the world around us.

Although it's surely true some men and some institutions block women's progress, what is more interesting to us are the ways in which women sabotage themselves and each other. Women need to understand the ways they hold themselves back and keep their daughters, their sisters, and all other women down. Women should not underestimate their ability to influence others: we can encourage and support or we can undermine and block other women's success.