Terrified of Turning 50? Embracing the Power of Fear

I write frequently about being fearless after fifty because a few years ago I chose to embrace my age with confidence, dignity, and joy. Part of my life’s mission is to share that message with others. Admittedly, getting older isn’t always easy: all kinds of changes -- wanted and unwanted -- go hand-in-hand with aging, which can often be so scary it stops us in our tracks, keeping us from moving forward.

But fear isn’t as evil as we think. While it’s usually viewed as an emotional experience we should avoid at all costs, in truth fear can turn our lives around by forcing us to make change for the better -- if harnessed correctly.

When I turned 50, fear started to creep into my mind. Looking in the mirror one day, this is what was staring back at me:

- felt invisible and ignored
- hadn’t exercised regularly in many years
- had very little energy
- had gained 15 pounds after menopause
- was genuinely afraid of being 50

I thought, "OK, this is it. This is what getting older is all about, and I’d better just accept it." I mentally tucked myself under the proverbial blanket, getting ready to stay there for the long haul. Fear was slowly taking over, engulfing my mind, and stopping me from living my best life.

But then I did some hardcore soul-searching, and realized there is another side of fear, one that could propel me to take action, to help me change my life. I spent some time digging deep within myself to get to the very core of my fear, and only then did I understand what was truly behind my angst:

I was terrified of becoming ill, disabled, dependent, and financially broke as I got older because of things I was -- or wasn’t -- doing now.

I knew that I hadn’t been doing all the right things for myself, being too busy taking care of others and working to even focus on me. And I was petrified that it was too late. All I could do was beat myself up for not having done this or that to get myself as healthy and fit as possible before I hit 50. And now that I was there, I was doomed.

I found myself asking the “What if?” questions: What if I get sick or have a heart attack? What if I get Alzheimer’s? What if I get cancer? Do I already have cancer and don’t know it? I looked around and people my age were having strokes, struggling with depression, developing diabetes. It’s not that younger people didn’t have some of these health concerns, but that after 50 they seemed all too common.

Baby boomers, especially those over the age of 60, are already the sickest and most expensive in terms of medical costs, and, unfortunately, a lot of the illnesses are due to obesity, poor nutrition and lack of exercise. In fact, this is the fastest growing health issue in the U.S., and it’s simply not being discussed enough. I was sure I would end up adding to these statistics.

The more I understood the impact my current actions and non-actions could have on my future health and well-being, the more afraid I became. The more afraid I became, the more determined I was to take back control of my life. And I did.

Seeing that drastic action was required, I took it upon myself to get the best information from the best experts on nutrition, fitness, health, and financial planning to feel good and look good so that I could stare at that person in the mirror with a renewed sense of pride and confidence, knowing that I was turning my fear into action and doing everything possible to age with confidence.

I started going for slow runs with breaks for walking every day and learned how to do push-ups and other exercises to prevent osteoporosis. I went for annual health checks. I changed the way I ate and dropped the bad habits I had slipped into. Where I had once spent my time dieting instead of eating, I began to pay attention to what I ate and to eat something healthy and small every couple of hours. I even accepted the fact that my hair, which I had spent decades straightening, was naturally wavy and looked its best that way. And I didn’t just lose the 15 lbs. I gained -- I dropped an entire pant size.
Instead of giving up and giving in, I took responsibility for my own health, which was the best way I could think of to make fear work for me, not against me.

Armed with my research and new attitude, I appeared on the Today Show, Good Morning America, The Early Show and Dr. Oz's radio show, among others, to talk about how I learned to embrace my age instead of fighting it, and accept change as it happens by turning my fear into action. During every interview, I share what I believe is the simple key to living your best life after 50:

It's okay to be afraid, because being scared can force you to make essential changes in your life. But it's not okay to live in fear. Living in fear will stop you from living your life. Embrace your age, whatever it is. Embrace getting older. Love your life, get as healthy as you can, move your body every day, be informed, stay engaged, connect with others, use your mind, live with style, be bold, be brave, walk with confidence -- then you will be truly fearless, no matter how old you are.

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Barbara Hannah Grufferman is the President of Best of Everything Media, Inc., author of "The Best of Everything After 50", a guide to positive aging, and is at work on her second book, "Fifty Rules: What Every Woman Needs to Do Before Turning 50", which will be published in Fall 2012. Visit www.bestofeverythingafter50.com for more tips on living your best life after 50. She can also be found on Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest.

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