

*Dealing with Depression as an Elder:*  
*A Guide Rooted in Wisdom and Change*

*Written by N. Kortner Nygard, Ph.D.*

*Honoring the Term “Elder”*

The word *Elder* is chosen with intention. It speaks not to frailty or decline, but to accumulated wisdom, lived experience, and the quiet authority of those who have weathered life’s storms. “Senior citizen” may be the common term, but it lacks reverence. Elders are not merely older—they are seasoned.



## *The Stress of Change*

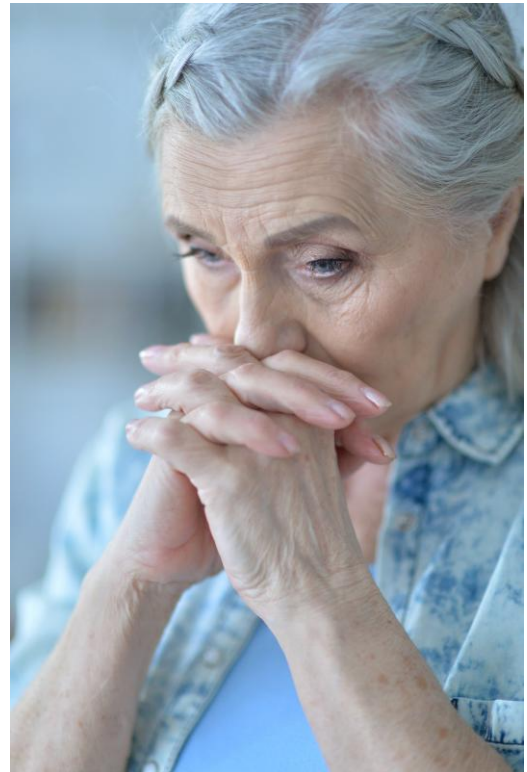
After 59 years as a clinical psychologist—30 of those spent in nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and private homes—I’ve seen a recurring pattern: resistance to change. When I introduce myself as Dr. Nygard, I often hear, “I ain’t crazy; I don’t need to see you.” That resistance softens when I explain that *change* itself is stressful. Not because we’re weak, but because we’re wired to conserve energy and maintain stability.

We float through life assuming continuity. Yet, when change inevitably arrives—loss of mobility, memory, independence—it disrupts that illusion. The stress isn’t just emotional; it’s existential.

## *Expectations and Suffering*

Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor-philosopher, discovered that *expecting* smooth days was itself a source of stress. He began to anticipate daily setbacks, and when they came, he was prepared. When they didn’t, he was pleasantly surprised. The Dalai Lama echoes this: *expectations are the root of suffering*.

As Elders, we often hope for smooth sailing. But aging brings waves—declines in strength, cognition, and autonomy. Depression often follows, not because we are broken, but because we are mourning the loss of our former selves.



## *Entropy and Acceptance*

Isaac Newton’s principle of entropy reminds us: everything wears down. The Appalachian Mountains once rivaled the Himalayas. Now, after 320 million

years of erosion, they peak at just over 6,000 feet. Even the Sun is aging, destined to become a red giant.

If mountains and stars must change, why should we be exempt? The goal is not to deny decline, but to resist it where possible—and accept it with grace when it cannot be reversed.

### *The Balancing Act*

Aging well means knowing when to fight and when to yield. We must:

- Accept irreversible changes
- Challenge temporary setbacks with grit
- Let go of outdated expectations
- Mourn what's lost, but celebrate what remains

Depression is often a natural part of this process. It's a form of grief—for our old selves. But it must be temporary. We must move forward.



### *The Rise of Gist*

Bill Thomas, founder of the Eden Alternative, describes how Elders gain *gist*—the ability to grasp the essence of things. While youth brings speed, age brings depth. Studies show that older adults often solve complex problems more effectively because they see the forest, not just the trees.



## *Elderhood as Graduation*

Retirement isn't an ending—it's a commencement. Like graduating college, it's a transition into a new phase. Instead of asking "What now?" we ask, "What next?" This is a time to:

- Reimagine your life plan
- Cultivate new skills and experiences
- Engage in meaningful service

## *The Power of Purpose*

Depression thrives in isolation and purposelessness. One man I met in a nursing home said, "I need a job!" I offered towel folding. He replied, "No! I want something that matters." He wasn't asking for busyness—he was asking for *meaning*.

Contrast that with a Southern California nursing home where residents made glycerine soap, sold it at a farmers market, and used the proceeds to cook meals for homeless families. Even those with dementia rallied when handed a serving ladle while a person approached down the steam table with a bowl. Purpose awakens something primal and powerful.



## *Final Thoughts*

Aging is not a slow fade—it's a transformation. Depression may visit, but it need not stay. By embracing change, seeking purpose, and honoring the wisdom of elderhood, we can age not just gracefully, but fruitfully.

## *Tools for Navigating Elderhood*

To support your Elderhood journey, consider these practical tools:

- **Journaling:** Reflect on daily experiences, emotions, and insights.
- **Mindfulness practices:** Meditation, breathing exercises, and body scans to stay present.
- **Community engagement:** Join clubs, volunteer groups, or spiritual communities.
- **Creative expression:** Art, music, writing, or storytelling to channel inner wisdom.
- **Physical activity:** Gentle movement like walking, tai chi, or chair yoga to maintain vitality.



## *Integrating the Past*

Elders carry rich histories. Sharing life stories not only preserves legacy but also fosters connection. Life review therapy, memoir writing, or simply telling stories to grandchildren can be deeply healing.

## *Mindfulness and the Present Moment*

### *Breathwork & Body Awareness*

Mindfulness has a long history of 4,000 years with Buddhism. It has the capacity to reduce anxiety and depression. To start, lie in a recliner, on a carpeted floor, or in bed. Put your arms at your sides and your legs straight and uncrossed. Take slow, deep breaths through your nose and exhale through pursed lips as though blowing out a candle. With each breath, imagine sending relaxation to various parts of your body, all the way down to your toes and up to the top of your head. With each exhalation, imagine breathing away tension. This will improve your relaxation.



### *Sensory Grounding*

Next, focus your attention on small details of your sensory inputs. Start with hearing—listen for even faint sounds. What can you hear?

Notice the sensation of the support you are lying on as it presses against your body in various locations. Notice the sensation of your clothing resting against your skin. Notice any internal sensations. This can even include discomfort. Inventory your abdomen, your chest, your head, your limbs. What is the total sum of sensations you're feeling in the moment?

### *Time Zone Awareness*

Remind yourself that you can only experience the present. Thoughts of the past are just memories. They tend to contribute to depression. They are in the wrong time zone. Likewise, the future can't be experienced currently. It tends

to create anxiety, and it, too, is in the wrong time zone. The right time zone is this moment only. Staying in the moment reduces depression from the past and anxiety from the future. Right now, at this moment, you are safe.

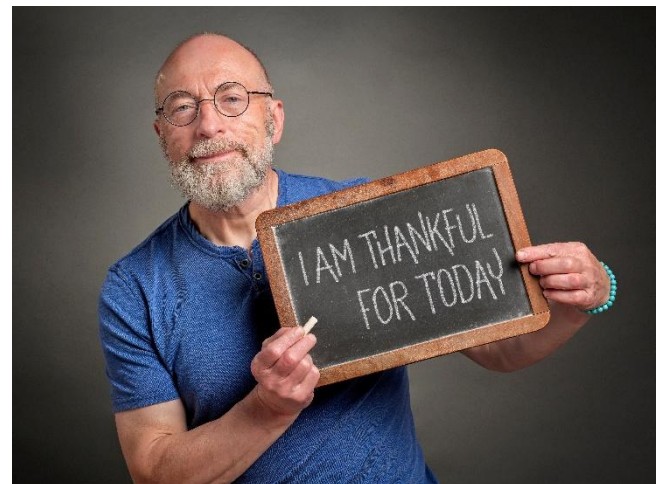
## *Embracing Stillness*

Research shows that we often avoid this state. It is akin to boredom, and we try to stay mentally busy. Staying in this state of boredom allows distractions to melt away and opens the door for the important things in our life to bubble to the surface. Our cell phones, computers, and televisions keep us distracted and grounded in trivia. We never get around to thinking about what our life means, where it's been, and where it's headed.

Researchers find that depression is associated with being in a state of continual trivialized distraction. Spending 15 minutes a day allowing boredom to settle in allows the important issues in our life to surface and reclaim guidance and meaning. The unconscious knows what we need. We simply need to quiet our minds and let it surface.

## *Gratitude and Positive Outlook*

Another useful practice is maintaining an attitude of positive outlook and gratitude. It's easy to get distracted by friends or chat room buddies complaining about things. That process of commiserating actually robs us of our power. We are explicitly or implicitly saying, "Ain't it awful! We are powerless. They are doing this to us. We are victims." Switching to an active and positive mindset can help us feel like agents of change, rather than victims of circumstance or persecution.



Taking a few minutes every day to list new things to be grateful for is an antidote to depression. The challenge is to come up with something new

every day. Try seven days of listing seven new things to be grateful for. The first list will be big, obvious things. As the week goes by, you will be forced to focus on smaller and smaller things. We normally trivialize the little things to be grateful for, but they are important too. The effects can be significant.

Reflecting on these small blessings can reconnect us with meaning and beauty in our lives.



### *Finding Beauty in the Everyday*

In talking about this with a client one time, I had this image occur to me. I imagined I was walking through a big meadow of knee-high grasses. The path beneath my feet was clear and dusty. Off in the distance was a stand of trees with cool shade. I knew there was a drink of cool water available at a spring when I got there.

The tendency is to focus on how hot it is right now; it's dry; I'm tired. I wish I was already there in the woods having my drink of water. This is like daily life. We tend to focus on how things are going to be when we get there, whenever "there" is. In our culture, that is typically the weekend.

The alternative is to realize that there are wonderful aspects of our current moment, but we overlook them. I imagined that I stopped walking on the path and instead bent over and picked up a fingertip of dust from the path. It contained minute flecks of rock chips that caught the light and sparkled in the sun. At that moment I was aware that I was walking on little diamonds! Even

out here in the hot sun, surrounded by dry grasses, there are sparkles. We need only pause and notice them.

Our lives are filled with smiling glances from passing strangers. All around us are little vignettes of art. If you take a cell phone camera and walk around the room and take close-ups of little details, you will find that some of them are actually artistic enough to be worthy of hanging in a gallery. Photographers and artists develop that ability to see beauty in forms, shading, texture, all around them. We need only train our eye to notice the sparkles.

Periodically take time to stop and notice all the little sparkles in our environment. Pause and let them soak in and feel good for a few moments.

### *Choosing Your Focus*

Of course life has frustrations and pain. It also has pleasure and successes. It is up to us where we put most of our attention. If we grasp the negative, our journey will be negative. If we focus on the positive, our journey will be more positive. The universe doesn't care whether we experience mostly negative or mostly positive aspects of our journey. That is entirely within our control. You don't have to be positive. You can choose to be negative if you enjoy suffering. However, remember you have a choice.



## *Adaptation and Resilience*

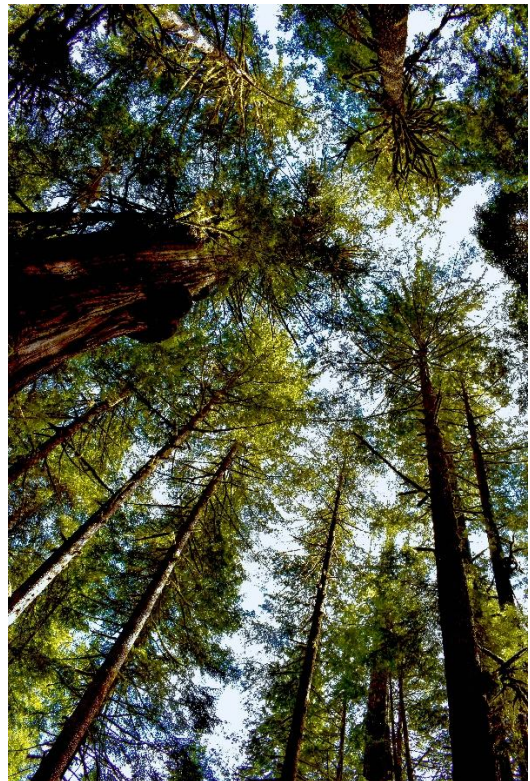
Our nervous system is constantly recalibrating where neutral is. If we experience lots of pleasure, the intensity decreases. This is the basis of addictions. What was pleasurable becomes the new normal. Similarly, negatives tend to be absorbed and recalibrated into a new normal.

Some people like Christopher Reeve or Michael J. Fox have experienced catastrophic life setbacks. With a positive attitude of figuring out how to make the best of this new chapter, they were both able to adapt to their catastrophes and find meaning and purpose in life.

That is to say, however, that joy is not attainable on a continuous basis. It must be experienced and then let go of for a period of recalibration. Our lives are designed to be mostly rising above and below the neutral point. If we pay attention to the positives as they come, our lives will be less grim and depressing. They will have more sparkles.

## *Looking Ahead*

The secret to smooth sailing as you age, is adapting to change. If you take an anxious approach to life, trying to control all contingencies, your rigidity will defeat you. There was a tall, strong cedar tree in my backyard that gripped the soil tenaciously. It resisted all winds and storms that buffeted. And yet, a recent storm snapped it in half, it's snagged splinters a skyward testimony to the folly of attempting ultimate control. By contrast, the tall grasses around its base



were laid flat by the winds and rain. When the storm passed they shook themselves free and stood again. To this day, they wave flexibly and gently in the breeze.

We cannot control or predict all the circumstances we'll face as we age. Events may knock us down for a bit, but they need not break us if we seek out ways to adapt and grow.

### **About the Author - N. Kortner Nygard, Ph.D.**

Dr. Nygard has been a practicing psychologist for 59 years. The last 35 were spent working with elders in assisted living, nursing homes, and in private practice.

He has served as the Director of Psychology at Saint Luke's Medical Hospital in Cedar Rapids IA, Co-founder of Nelson Associates Consulting in Iowa City, Executive Vice President of Research and Training for Rebound Inc. in Hendersonville TN, Eden Alternative mentor, and Founder of the Tennessee Eden Alternative Coalition. Most recently, he became Regional Vice-President of GeroPsych Division of Key Rehabilitation in Murfreesboro TN. He is currently retired and doing volunteer work, organizing community services for elders.

Dr. Nygard recognizes the challenges of aging—physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. His experience working with elders informs his belief in the potential of older adults to change, grow, and overcome setbacks.

