

Rebellious Wellness^{over 50}

Living Longer is the New Normal!



Ep 7: Living Longer is the New Normal! with Dr. Joe Casciani

Gregory Anne Cox

Welcome back, everybody. Today, my guest is Dr. Joe Casciani. He has a 30-year history in long-term care as a psychologist and mental health, and an expert in mental health practices. He is most interested in the aging part, how the psychology of aging is applied and *how we can age better*. His new business is called Living to One Hundred, The Living to One Hundred Club, where he is reaching out to people who are aging, which pretty much includes everybody in the world, and certainly people at midlife and beyond who are looking for strategies, tips, techniques, and community to age as well as they can.

Gregory Anne Cox

So, without further ado, Dr. Joe, welcome and thank you so much for being here with us today.

Dr. Joe

You're most welcome. Gregory, thanks very much for inviting me.

Gregory Anne Cox

Sure, I should mention also that one of the things I love when we sort of met online is that you like to say, and are the author of a book called "Living Longer Is the New Normal". And the book is subtitled Lessons from a Geropsychologist on Living Longer and Making It Over the Hurdles. Tell us a little bit about that book, because I just love the concept that living longer is the new normal.

Dr. Joe

Well, yeah, we are certainly living longer term. Life expectancy continues to increase and we're seeing more and more people every day who are functioning High-Performance in their 70s, 80s and 90s. So my book is really focused on successful aging, but also making it over the hurdles because we know not everybody is a high performer in their 70s, 80s and 90s. And there are hurdles. There are obstacles that we encounter. So, my background kind of steered me in this direction, **that successful aging is more about a mindset.**

Dr. Joe

It's really about maintaining this positive mindset about our future and not looking at what's going wrong, but looking at what's ahead, what opportunities I have ahead. And I'm going to hit some potholes. We know there are always setbacks. There are always physical changes, losses, personal losses, friends, spouses, there's always setbacks. But my contention is, yes, we have to face those, and we work through those changes and try to get beyond it.

Dr. Joe

So, living longer is the new normal? Yes, we are living longer, but what do we do with these extra years? So, my thing, is make sure we are open to opportunities ahead because there are a lot of opportunities.

Gregory Anne Cox

There are. And we'll talk about those in a minute. But I'm curious, how did you did you always want to work in the field of gerontology in the psychology, work with the idea of aging? How did you come to this?

Dr. Joe

I started out after I got licensed, as a psychologist. I'm here in California and I got licensed. And the year after that, I took a position on a Gero psychiatric unit with county mental health. And that was my first real exposure to working with seniors. And I learned a lot of things, this happened to be an inpatient psychiatric unit. So we had a lot of admissions from the community and people that were confused and disoriented and seemed to be demented, seem to be maybe suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Dr. Joe

But I learned after we got them cleaned up and good nutrition and medication and literally cleaned up, they came back. There was still a high-functioning person there. So, I mean, that was just one piece. But I also learned that there are a lot of things that psychologists can do with this population that other physicians, other health care professionals cannot do because we can kind of look below the surface and see what what the function is. So I had that position that I was awarded a contract with the Department of Aging here in California to write a training manual.

Dr. Joe

Another psychologist and I had a three-year contract to write a manual on mental health topics for nursing homes and to bring this manual around the state to train what we call train the trainers. There's always staff, trainers. And so we had the obligation to train the people on mental health topics. And that was a great experience. And shortly after that, you know, things just fell into line and I was approached by a physician to start a new company, which is kind of history now, I was with that company for 16 years and we contracted with nursing homes around the country. We were in eight states, close to a thousand facilities. And I was the lead clinical psychology director. So I got to see firsthand the real impact that mental health professionals can have with this population. I continued, I left that company, started my own and stayed with my own company for 10 years and then sold that last year. So pretty much my whole career focused on aging and looking at kind of the upside to aging, not just the decline.

Gregory Anne Cox

Yeah. Which is a great conversation to have because so much of what's out there circulating, although when you and I had a conversation, I asked if you thought you agism was as bad and you thought it wasn't quite as bad. And there are more high functioning people. So, the picture is changing. But I think because our brains are wired to look for negative things, oftentimes the conversation about getting older is like, oh my gosh, I'm going to break my hip and I'm going to lose my mind and I can't find my car keys.

Gregory Anne Cox

Does that mean I'm losing my mind? You know? So, I love that you are looking at the upside of aging. So, speaking of that, you have a key phrase. You talk about turning aging on its head. What does that actually mean?

Dr. Joe

Yeah, you know, that came through right away as soon as I formed the company, Living to 100 Club. I was looking for a tag line and to me, it captures the notion of getting over the stereotypes.

Dr. Joe

Let's not let the number get in the way because there are always people who are doing better than us and there are always people who are not as well as us who are doing poorly. So let's stop using number as any kind of gauge of what we should or should not be doing. So, turning aging on its head is just that, to give up that those, you know, what I call self-limiting beliefs that really hold us back and kind of foster that negative stereotype.

Dr. Joe

So, to me, it's like, let's look at the other side of the coin and look at the positives as I talk about celebrating aging and really building on that that positive mindset. I think there's so much upside here for individuals that they let go of those negative beliefs and start looking at, you know, maybe digging deep and finding some some new energy and new potential and new interest. And that's that's what I think is kind of our future as we age.

Gregory Anne Cox

I can almost extrapolate what you're talking about before, when you worked in the the psych ward for the elderly people and you said once you got them quote unquote, cleaned up, you saw that there was still a functioning person in there once they were given proper nutrition and maybe some love in the way of connection and communication. And I think it's possible I watched this happen with my mother-in-law who is deceased now. She lived alone. She was in rural Wales in a beautiful community.

Gregory Anne Cox

She had neighbors, but really, she just stopped engaging and little by little the decline. But when we would come visit the first hour, she was sort of low key. But within an hour or two, she was engaged and playing with the kids and there was that old spark of her. And so, one of the things for me, and your Living To 100 club is going to be a great resource for people, is to stay connected with other people.

Gregory Anne Cox

Even if you can't get out. We have to look at we're on Zoom right now. Almost everybody has a phone, some way of connecting. But it's the right groups that will engage you to stay positive and encourage you to age with grace and ease or joy and ease. That is so important.

Dr. Joe

I think engagement is the key, Greg. You know, we talk about waking up each morning with a smile on her face and saying, what's my purpose today? What's my objective? What's my goal today? And we really need to have that, whatever it is, whether it's solitary or whether it's social and interpersonal, we really have to have something to look forward to. And that's what the importance of having some kind of hobby or interest or passion or volunteer work or something that offers that kind of stimulation for us.

Dr. Joe

So people who live alone aren't necessarily lonely. We know that. So and there are plenty of people who are lonely because they're missing that that contact, that human relationship. And as you say, it's so much more available now because of our technology and phones and iPads and all of that.

Gregory Anne Cox

As much as they drive us crazy, they certainly are there are benefits to them.

Dr. Joe

There certainly are.

Gregory Anne Cox

So, what are your particular habits? What are so you wake up every day, I'm going to guess with a smile on your face and decide what your purpose is for the day. What kind of habits do you have to ensure your longevity is what you'd like it to be?

Dr. Joe

Well, I should say I recommend that to others. I can't always promise that I can smile.

Gregory Anne Cox

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know.

Dr. Joe

You know, I love the work of the Blue Zones. I think I may have mentioned that to you in a previous conversation. Dan Buettner and Nick Buettner and that team who discovered the lifestyle habits of the centenarians around the world, people who are

living longest have a lot of common behaviors, things that they do similarly across these different countries. And, you know, it's the diet, and it's proper sleep, and it's social engagement family networks. For me, I start every day on my treadmill and a gravity machine and, you know, I just I don't love to exercise.

Dr. Joe

People say exercise should be fun. I don't find it fun. I just find it necessary. So I, you know, maybe a mile and every morning. And watch my diet know, stay away from the fast food, that's just the worst for us. I just wrote a newsletter for February for our club members about diet and healthy eating. There's really a lot of a lot of good information out there. And I reference some of the nutritional guides from several different countries, and they're all similar.

Dr. Joe

Of course, they're all parallel in terms of what you should and should not eat. But the great thing is that it's easy to follow. These are colorful, they're simple two or three pages of good foods and not good. So I included those in my newsletter. The other thing that I just did and I'm really happy about is I bought a drum set. I bought electronic drum set. I've never played a musical instrument in my life. And I wanted to learn something new.

Dr. Joe

And, you know, I for some reason, for the last couple of years, I've been thinking about this. So I bought the drum set and I set it up and I'm taking lessons. And I think we always need to reach and stretch and kind of learn new things, whether it's a language or taking a class, there are so many online classes now that we can learn, we can get credit or not credit, we can volunteer, there's all types of opportunities to connect with others, connect with the world and really to keep opening doors.

Dr. Joe

I think that's the that's the way to successfully keep age, keep opening doors.

Gregory Anne Cox

I love that you've got drums to my I always wanted drums when I was a young person, maybe early teens. My mother, of course, was having none of that. So because we lived in an apartment and it wouldn't have there would be nowhere for me to hide the noise of a drum. So I totally understand. But I think that's so cool that you're doing that.

Dr. Joe

That's the beauty of the electronics, because you have a headset and nobody can, nobody can hear you.

Gregory Anne Cox

Oh, I didn't realize that.

Dr. Joe

Nobody can hear it. You can, of course, plug it into your loudspeaker eventually. But starting out and it's very authentic. I've got to say this.

Gregory Anne Cox

Oh, my gosh. That's great.

Dr. Joe

Yeah. It really sounds like acoustic drums. Yeah. So I'll let you know. Yeah.

Gregory Anne Cox

I want to hear a concert. One of these days.

Gregory Anne Cox

One of the, a book that I'm working my way through because it's about 600 pages you may be familiar with called Successful Aging by Dr. Daniel Levitin, who's a neuro psychologist. Got a couple of degrees. But one of the things that he talks about in the chapter I'm reading right now is the importance of learning something new and challenging the mind. And it takes things from a brain perspective out of the Seduko crossword, we should be playing bridge and all those. That's great. And it doesn't create new synapses. It doesn't make the mind stronger as the mind wants to decline and get sort of more comfortable. It's great if you don't know how to learn how to play bridge to learn. But if we keep going back to the things that we're familiar with and is easy for us to do, even if we're taking an advanced crossword puzzle to do, that's not going to be enough as we age.

Gregory Anne Cox

But learning the drums or maybe taking a language, like you said, a new course, maybe I would want to take a neuro psychobiology class from Stanford, which I've been looking at. Those kinds of things are really important to keep the brain, at least where it is, and not sliding backwards,

Dr. Joe

Right? Yeah. I mean, it is good to maintain those kind of mentally stimulating activities. But I understand the point about creating new neural pathways. Yeah, that's the that's

the goal here to to force our brains to create some new connections and new pathways and get those nerve cells working. And, you know, the newness and the unfamiliar territory literally, is what I think is the strategy here.

Gregory Anne Cox

Yeah. And it's like you said, it's like exercise. You may or may not like it, but the brain needs it, too, so we can give the brain some exercise. And it's easier than getting on a treadmill every day or whatever else it is that we do.

Gregory Anne Cox

So, what is the, you know, we there are so many millions of different ways to age from a genetic point of view. But we know the genes are about 50 percent of the picture. And we've already talked about staying connected and having healthy habits. But I want to go back to the mind set piece. Let's just say we're cruising along. We've been healthy, and all of a sudden we hit one of those bumps, those road blocks or hurdles, as you mentioned.

Gregory Anne Cox

And I know that when we talk about mindset, I've been a coach for 18 years, 17 years, and sometimes the outside world outside of the coaching world or the psych world, if you talk about mindset, it's like, oh, that's, you know, some namby pamby way of trying to sugarcoat what's ugly and horrible and painful maybe. What do you say to somebody who all of a sudden hits a hurdle? How do you get your mind wrapped around it?

Gregory Anne Cox

How do you deal with it if you're not used to thinking about mindset?

Dr. Joe

Yeah, it really is a different way of looking at these events, how we interpret events, how we explain events that colors how well we cope with them, how well we manage them. And there's, my favorite quote is from I think there's a great philosopher who was a first a slave. His name is Epictetus. And he may have heard this, but his line was "we are disturbed not by events, but by the views we take of these events."

Gregory Anne Cox

Mm hmm.

Dr. Joe

So, yeah, and I'd love to do this exercise when I'm speaking in front of groups. I divided in half, left half and right half the left half. I said look around the room and find everything that's wrong. Everything that's broken or dirt stains or windows need

cleaning or fixtures are not right, just look around. And then. right, half, I want you to look around the room and find everything that's nice about the room, the color, the sunlight, whatever is happening, and we take a minute and then we go back and forth and share.

Dr. Joe

And my point is. It's the same room, the same room, it's half full or half empty, it's the same eight-ounce glass with four ounces of water. So it's how our perception is tuned to looking for what's wrong. Are we looking for what's right? So for the person who is going along and doing great and independent and having a great life and maybe trips and falls and breaks her hip or falls and breaks your shoulder, that's a hip fracture.

Dr. Joe

So I've seen this so many times in individuals in the nursing home who go into rehab and it's their outlook. And what are they expecting from this treatment, from this rehabilitation? And if they don't see themselves as capable, they really have trouble getting through rehab because rehab is very difficult. You may know, it's very difficult. It's physically demanding and it wears you out. But it's that that idea that my my outlook is going to determine how well I handle this this rehabilitation.

Dr. Joe

So for anybody that's, you know, kind of pooh poohing it, read some books, read the books by Joe Dispenza, a great author, talks about this all all the time, that our mindset is going to bring us through a lot of the physical challenges that we face and what we think about we bring about.

Dr. Joe

I mean, there's loads of quotes of right. That kind of shed light on this whole thing. It's it's that how we interpret an event that's going to color how well we manage it. And if we expect it to rob us of our independence and slow us down and strip us of our of our quality of life, that's what's going to happen. That's not not necessary. We can see it in a positive way, too.

Gregory Anne Cox

Mm hmm. And I was reminded of Bruce Lipton is also somebody who talks about, he started his career in cells and epigenetics, but he talks often about the nocebo versus the placebo effect, which is kind of what you're talking about. So everybody knows the placebo effect is where people get a sugar pill because they don't know whether they're

getting a drug or a sugar pill and they have good results in healing or less pain or whatever. What people talk less about is nocebo, which is if you tell somebody this is going to make you sick, this is right now there's a whole thing swirling around about Covid the second vaccine.

Gregory Anne Cox

It's going to put you down for two days. You're going to have this or maybe you won't. But the people who buy into the negative thinking are more likely to suffer a negative consequence. And that's just what you're talking about with the rehab or coming through a disease. And this is not sugarcoating or Pollyanna looking at the thing.

Gregory Anne Cox

It's a reality.

Dr. Joe

We do we need to dig deep at those times and pull out that strength and drive or grit whatever I want to call it. And I maintain that it never goes away. You know, it's always there. And it might get covered over and might get blocked. We might feel depressed and not see any positives, not see any any signs of hope. But it's always there. So the trick is, it's not a trick. It's the goal is to unlock that that that fire and determination.

Dr. Joe

And the best part and what I would often tell patients is that, look, once you're in touch with that fire and determination, nobody can take it away from it's yours forever. Nobody can take it. Not your family, not your doctor, not your therapist. Nobody can say, hey, slow down, that's yours. That's your belief. And you own that forever.

Gregory Anne Cox

Yeah. And I guess one of the things that we could tap into also is the other times that we've come through, the other times and we've had to have grit, especially people who have children, I've seen so many people do so much hard stuff to make sure their kids were safe or fed or clothed or understood or went to a good school, you know, and most of us have had trials and tribulations along the way that knocked us off our path. And maybe we were down for a while.

Gregory Anne Cox

But again, there's something and and maybe what do you think about having a why? Like, do you think that plays into it rather than give up and say, oh, well, this is my lot now? It's my view right now at this age that I think there's still so much I want to do or I

want to see what it's like at this point ten years from now when I've accomplished this or that. Do you think that goals for life play into how we recover?

Dr. Joe

Oh, sure. There's a motivational speaker Dan Sullivan. He said our future should be bigger than our past. That captures it. You know, what you're talking about is that the whole idea of kind of looking at past successes to help us deal with future challenges. And Robert Butler, gerontologist, wrote a book called "Life Review", and that was his whole approach, that when we're facing these challenges in our senior years, let's look back and see what we what we accomplished and how much we had to work and really, you know, kind of muster all of our strength to make it through that and that's what helps us in the future. So it's it's I think it's a common approach. And we're coming at the solution from all different directions. There's one goal here.

Gregory Anne Cox

Yeah, that's a really good point. There's not just one way to approach this better aging or healthier aging or happier aging thing.

So, when we talk about living our best life, do you think there's a way to ensure not having those regrets that are so common?

Dr. Joe

Yeah, that's a tough one I've seen in people who are depressed. They focus on everything that's wrong. They focus on their losses, their failures, their regrets, their disappointments, and I often use the analogy of horses who are fitted with blinders or blinkers, and the horses are wearing these so they're not distracted by what's going on around them.

Dr. Joe

All they can see is what's ahead, and that's worse for horses. But it doesn't work for humans because it prevents us. If we're wearing these blinders or blinkers, it prevents us from seeing the whole picture and seeing what's all around us. So in essence, that means let's look at the good things that you're not seeing. There are things that you may be disappointed about. Let's look at what you accomplished. Let's look at the decisions that you made.

Dr. Joe

Maybe now you think it was a wrong decision. But at that time, 20 years ago, it was the only decision you had. It was that was you had good reason for making it. You might not agree now, but you had a reason for making that decision. So the other thing is the other point I wanted to make. As we're aging to live, our best life is in the midst of all of this

physical decline and sensory losses, our vision, our hearing, our hair turns gray and our muscle strength is declining. So people, unfortunately equate physical appearance with beauty. And that's that's a trap because beauty is not based on physical appearance. Beauty is based on how we feel about ourselves and the strength and the positives that we exude to others. You know, somebody who has had some facial scarring from cancer surgery or somebody who's lost their legs because of, you know, atrophy or whatever, they can still have that sense of beauty, even though physically they may not be attractive.

Dr. Joe

So, living our best life to me means accepting where we are and striving for what else we can bring into our life and not get not get caught up in, you know, the past and the regrets about what we did yesterday, you know, we're always redefining ourself yesterday doesn't define who we are today. And that's an important point. A lot of people let yesterday, last year and, you know, decades ago, define who we are today.

Dr. Joe

We know that self-definition can, we can always change. There's a beautiful story about Steve Jobs. Anybody who's read the biography by Walter Isaacson. Yeah. You know, Steve Jobs was adopted and he found out he was adopted. You know, he was a young teen, I think, around ten or 12. And he was just completely devastated. You know, he felt like how how can my biological parents not not want me? How could they give me up? I must have been such an unworthy person with no value. And the adoptive parents said, "Steve, no, no, no.

Dr. Joe

When we adopted you as an infant, we thought you were the most beautiful person in the world. And you were you were so valuable and important to us." So it's that just in that instant, like a light switch is thrown, he shifted from being the most worthless person to being the most valuable person. And what happened? Nothing happened. He wasn't given any new skills or talents by his adoptive parents. It was that mindshift that created this.

Dr. Joe

And wow, I really do have something, I do have some worth. And it is too bad that we base that worth on what others say because we always have that worth intrinsically, regardless of what other people tell us. But in that instant, he was able to shift from black to white or from positive or negative to positive. That's you know, it's a it's the way our mind can work and how we can kind of reconfigure, reinterpret relabel events that go on in our life, that that's what gives us the opportunity to keep moving forward.

Gregory Anne Cox

You know, I love the point you made about, twenty years ago, the decision was the right decision or it was the only one we thought we could make, and we're not the same person as we were 20 years ago and. The future is often written by the past, like you said, right, we're going to define ourselves by what we did then, which limits our possibility of what could be in the future.

Dr. Joe

Yeah, for sure.

Gregory Anne Cox

So, we may not take an opportunity that comes along because we think, oh, well, for instance, I. I could never play an instrument then, so why would I bother getting a drum set or, you know, I wasn't good with money so I better not go off and be an entrepreneur because I really would like to start this business. There are all sorts of ways that we limit ourselves based on thinking about the past or something that somebody told us.

Gregory Anne Cox

And that's why I think it's really important to have people in our corner always that will see who we really are. The beauty with the wrinkles or the scars or the no legs, whatever it is, the beauty that is still the human being. That is your friend, right? We're friends based not on how we look or what we have, hopefully, but because we're good people and we make friends.

Yeah, we should keep those people around us is what I'm saying, to reflect back to us when we're feeling low or something's not going well or we break an elbow or lose some money is like, "hey, I still love you.

Dr. Joe

Yeah, that's really crucial.

Dr. Joe

You're right at that support and guidance and a little boost now and then. I remember talking to many patients who had strokes and they were confined to bed and they were getting involved in rehab. And I was I always like the analogy of being the captain of your ship, you know, and I would tell a patient, look, you are not your body, right? Your body is not cooperating here. Your body is unable to get up and walk.

Dr. Joe

And, you know, but you are still the captain of that ship and. You know, you worked with her because for her, I would come in and. How are you doing today, Captain? She said,

I'm doing great. I was able to get up and actually sat in my wheelchair. And one day I came in. How are you doing, Captain? She said, Well, I. I think the ship ran aground.

Dr. Joe

She said I was out taking steps with a walker and the rehab therapist and I fell. And so I said, oh, yeah, that that's going to happen because your body is still not there it is still not cooperating. Now, she was a fortunate you know, she really progressed in her rehab. That's not to say everybody is going to do that with just.

Dr. Joe

With just determination, but the point is, are our consciousness or whatever is going on in our head is not the same as our our body. Our body is physical and we are really separate from the body. That's where that's where the the whole idea of this kind of self assurance and sense of beauty and worth comes from regardless of what goes on in our body, regardless of what kind of physical decline we have or whatever is going on. We still have that sense of worth and value and assurance that's, that's what matters,

Gregory Anne Cox

And I think that's a beautiful way to frame the whole conversation of aging honestly, is let's look at it as, I always say, it's a gift, I joke, but it's you know, another year is a gift, even the more wrinkles the whatever, because the alternative, that's so good right now anyway, I think this has been a great conversation.

Dr. Joe

And I want to mention your website, which is Living to One Hundred Club. Is that correct?

Dr. Joe

That's correct. That's correct.

Gregory Anne Cox

And you've got. Go ahead.

Dr. Joe

I'm just going to say I just want to mention if anybody wants a quick look at my strategies for positive aging, if you go to my website, Living to 100 dot club, slash nine tips, you'll get a collection of strategies on maintaining a positive frame of mind as we age, so Living to one hundred dot club/ nine tips, it's there and certainly we encourage people to sign up a subscriber. You get our announcements, you get our newsletters or you can become a VIP member in our club for an extra level of engagement.

Dr. Joe

Yeah, I really enjoyed this conversation.

Gregory Anne Cox

I do, too. I really did.

Dr. Joe

Yeah, there's so much that we have to offer. I mean, in terms of our compassion and wisdom and insight and resilience, you know, there's some research saying that older adults are better able to cope with this whole Covid. I mean, they're concerned about getting infected, but they are coping better in this one sample, one study. They're coping better than middle aged adults with the whole pandemic scare. And, you know, it's it kind of comes from, look, bad things happen and we get through them.

Dr. Joe

You know, we we find a way to get through them. So we have a lot to offer

Gregory Anne Cox

More power to the oldies.

Dr. Joe

Yeah, great.

Gregory Anne Cox

Dr. Joe, thank you so much for being here. I really enjoyed this conversation. We'll put your website on the podcast page as well so people can find it there. And I hope to have you back again sometime. We'll talk.

Dr. Joe

Right. Would love that. Thanks very much for the invitation again and keep up the good work.

Gregory Anne Cox

Thanks so much. Be well til next time, everybody.