it is time to call it quits out of his daughter’s hands and accepted this transition as his own responsibility.

Imagine if everyone approached this situation the way Bud does—how many hurt feelings and intense family struggles might be avoided. The self-awareness he demonstrates, as well as the strength and fortitude to face whatever may come, is a gift to his children and grandchildren, a gift that not only helps maintain family harmony but also offers a positive, confident, and proactive role model of aging for many generations to come.

Agency’s mental toolkit

So, if our interviewees displayed an ability to be in charge of their own lives and happiness, how did they do it? What mental tools did they use? Across our discussions, through stories that were funny, inspiring, and poignant, several themes emerged. Below are the four mental tools our interviewees relied on most frequently to help them maintain a mindful, proactive approach to aging:

• Perspective
• Positive attitude
• Gratitude
• Humor

We’ll take these one at a time and share with you what we heard from our interviewees as well as studies that show our interviewees are onto something.

Perspective is key

Diane, who changed her life when she chose to begin traveling alone, was sitting in the office in the social-work practice she
began after finishing her studies. Her brown hair was in a curly halo around her fine-boned face, which was suddenly serious.

She had been talking about how much she loved pursuing the opportunities that had opened up to her once she chose to author her own life. Then she began explaining that she suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, a serious and debilitating disease. In her 30s, she had begun to think of her life in terms of the limitations she struggled against, knowing they would only get worse as she aged. After giving birth to a healthy boy and girl, she would have liked to have a third child but was advised against it because of the symptoms of her illness. She was feeling sorry for herself—until she emerged from her doctor's office and caught sight of a 12-year-old girl who was badly disfigured by the disease.

At that moment, not only was Diane hit with the realization that her symptoms were mild compared to the child's but also, she felt a rush of gratitude that, as a mother, she was the one suffering with the disease rather than one of her children; had it been her daughter who was afflicted, Diane would have been praying for it to have been her instead. Now she thought to herself, “Yes, I'm so grateful I don't have to pray for that. It's me! It's me!”

“I had a real epiphany,” she said, running a hand through her curls. “I said, ‘Okay it's time to move on. I'm the luckiest person in the world.’”

We heard similar stories from other interviewees. There was a sense of perspective that came from understanding the full spectrum of potential outcomes and realizing that their situation was not the worst on the spectrum; and this perspective gave them the ability to weather difficult moments. For instance, medical ailments seemed less taxing when the alternative was considered. “Okay, I’m around,” was a sentiment we often heard.
In *Tuesdays with Morrie,* Mitch Albom marvels over how his former professor, Morrie Schwartz, is able to take a similar approach, even in the midst of suffering from ALS with only a few months to live:

“Dying,” Morrie suddenly said, “is only one thing to be sad over, Mitch. Living unhappily is something else. So many of the people who come to visit me are unhappy.”

Why?

“Well, for one thing, the culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. We’re teaching the wrong things. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn’t work, don’t buy it. Create your own. Most people can’t do it. They’re more unhappy than me—even in my current condition.”

“I may be dying, but I am surrounded by loving, caring souls. How many people can say that?”

**Positive attitude**

We’re all familiar with the notion that our attitudes and perspectives shape our experiences. Viktor Frankl, a neurologist and psychiatrist imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, wrote of observing prisoners who managed to survive the horror psychologically intact: “Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

He was stunned by humans’ ability to weather even the greatest difficulty through the power of their own frame of mind, rather than allowing despair to pervade.

Jean, whose mother-in-law radiates positivity, emphasized to us in her interview the importance of focusing on what’s going
well. “Even if we go through a stressful aging process, we should always appreciate the good things and minimize the bad things,” she said. As another of our interviewees, Judy, put it, “What makes people hurt is not what you have but what you think you don’t have.”

The good news is, when we choose to see the glass as half full, life becomes easier and more pleasant for us and for others—and we measurably improve our health. A 2002 study from Yale, aptly titled *Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging,*\(^1\) revealed striking results about the correlation between attitude and well-being: those with more positive self-perceptions of aging, measured up to 23 years earlier based on how much they disagreed with statements like “As you get older, you are less useful,” lived seven and a half years longer than those with less positive perceptions. According to the researchers, after controlling for a variety of factors, the findings suggest, “self-perceptions of aging have an impact on survival...that is far greater than the impact of some other variables that have been previously linked to survival, including gender, socioeconomic status, functional health, and loneliness.”

Jean summarized it best: “The one thing we can define for ourselves is having a positive attitude—if you have a positive attitude, everything looks a little better.”

But is this really enough? In the 1970s, research\(^12\) revealed that expressed attitudes (such as “I believe exercise is important for your health”) did not necessarily lead to change in behavior (e.g., getting off the couch and going for a run). In other words, having a good attitude about something did not automatically lead to improved outcomes—an element of will was still needed in order to translate internal thoughts into external action.