

I remember when I was the youngest one in the room.

I was in my early 20s, working at my first professional job, and my colleagues were at least twice my age. I thought they were so much more sophisticated than I was. They had children, and money issues, and were concerned about their aging parents and their medical needs. My only stress was finding the right outfit for a Saturday-night date. I was free and clear with no real responsibilities other than paying my rent and getting to work on time.

When I was 22, and my parents were in their 50s, they had careers, traveled and went out with friends, but I still thought of them as incredibly old, and I couldn't imagine ever being their age.

But life has a way of racing ahead, and 28 years later, I celebrated my own 50th birthday. I didn't feel "old," or any different than I had at 40 or 30 or even 20. But society had given me the message that being 50 was not something to celebrate.

The night before I turned 49, I was distressed, worried that in a year people would know I was 50, as if that number would somehow be branded across my face. I wasted time not enjoying that year because all I could think about was what was to come. That pressure that we feel to continue to be young can take its toll. Not caving into that pressure, and enjoying your life is what keeps you youthful.

I remember one of the first times I realized I had gotten older was when I walked near a construction site. The workers looked over my head and whistled at the 20-something woman walking behind me. I haven't been whistled at in years, and even though I hated it, I missed knowing that I was whistleable (if that's even a term).

Nobody wants to deal with sexual attention from creepy guys, but you don't want to feel sexually invisible either.

As we age, most changes are subtle, and until we look back at pictures, we often don't

see them. Depending on our health, and our situation in life, we age at different rates. Some people don't care about how their skin and body changes, while others fight it to the end.

When I saw my first gray hair, I couldn't stop staring at it, because it took me a while to comprehend what that thing was that was growing out of my head. I was in my 40s, and as any parent will tell you, the easiest way to get gray hair is to have children.

Parenting is a hard job, and there's no way to know how you're doing at the time. (You can't count when a 12-year-old tells you that you're the worst because you took away their screen time.)

I now know my husband and I have done a good job. Not only do our young-adult sons like to spend time with us, but when we hand them petty cash, they respond, "No, thank you, I'm good."

I still have the same energy I had in my 30s; even before I had kids. I still work out almost every day. The difference is now I'm one of the oldest in my weightlifting classes. But I'm also one of the strongest.

The women in my class are mostly in their late 30s and early 40s and have a gaggle of children. I spend weekends reading a book in front of a roaring fire while they're at kids' birthday parties. I'll take getting older any day if it means not having to listen to one more person singing "Happy Birthday" to a screaming 3-year-old who doesn't like loud noises.

When I was busy raising my two sons, I didn't take time for myself. I didn't have the time to exercise or relax with a cup of coffee unless I was willing to get up at 5:00 a.m., and I wasn't giving up sleep for anything. Even my dogs got to the vet more than I got to the doctor. I did try to eat healthily, at least when I wasn't eating leftover chicken nuggets off my kids' plates.

But by the time I was 50, I no longer had to put everyone in front of me. I could now take care of getting that mammogram, seeing friends and traveling with my husband.

And not having to take care of getting dinner on the table for a picky child or having to help someone study the French and Indian War when I'd rather be watching "The Bachelor" never ceases to delight me.

As women, the number of years we've been on the planet can brand us. For those of us who took time off from our careers to have our kids, reentering the workforce at an older age can work against us. When you're older, you bring wisdom and experience to any situation, so employers should rush to hire us. Many of us have raised families, know how to budget, are great at organizing schedules and have good communication skills.

Getting older also came with a new mindset. I used to concentrate on things I regretted that I had or hadn't done. Like, why the heck did I stay with my high school boyfriend when he was obviously such a jerk? Now that I've lived many more years, those regrets have evaporated, because now I know that those choices have helped make me who I am today.

I also stopped caring what random people thought of me. When I was in my 20s, I wanted to be liked by everyone. I was also afraid to take risks. As I entered my 50s, I realized I have a voice and an opinion, and I'm not afraid to use either one.

So, much to my surprise, my life wasn't over when I hit 50. Instead, I started a new chapter and reinvented myself: I became an author for the first time when my novel "After Happily Ever After" was published. I didn't go through any type of "crisis"; rather, it felt more like midlife empowerment.

Fifty didn't mean I was going to slow down at all. In fact, I found myself busier than

ever. I know plenty of women who published their first books in their late 60s or 70s, and I still have a long way to go to reach those ages. (OK, maybe not a *long* way, but I have a lot to do in the years before I get there.)

Now that I'm older, I wonder if when my parents hit 50 they also felt the renewed energy I've experienced. They were rid of their kids and could do what they wanted, when they wanted. They recovered the freedom they had before my sisters, and I were born. They could even run around the house naked — although that's not something I want to imagine.

So, maybe 50 is the new 35, and I'm good with that. But I'm also good with the idea that 50 is just 50. I'm in the prime of my life. I mostly do what I want. I am still a contributor to society, whether by writing my novels or by being there for my friends and family. I plan to keep doing all of that for many years to come.

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