

# 10 Questions for Katharine Esty, PhD

Author of

*Eightysomethings:*

*A Practical Guide to Letting Go, Aging Well, and Finding Unexpected Happiness*



**Q. You say your life just rolled along in your seventies, as it always had. But at age eighty, for the first time, you felt old. What happened that made you want to find out what people were experiencing when they got old and how they felt about it?**

**A.** Frankly, I was in a funk. Feeling like it was going to be all down hill and I was pretty desperate to see if there were some people who could teach me a thing or two about aging with grace.

**Q. You decided to answer the questions you had about the quality of life for ordinary eightysomethings by doing some research on your own. Why was there so little information about your particular and age group and how did you decide you were going to get the information you needed?**

**A.** It was hard to find information because people 65 and older were lumped together. It was even hard even to find out exactly how many people there were in their 80s but not including the 90s. Also, I was most interested in the up close and personal stories, what I called to my self the inside story of real people in their eighties. As a psychotherapist, I am an old hat at interviewing and I hunched I would hear some compelling stories.

**Q. One surprising thing you learned was that today there are almost 10 million eightysomethings presently living in the U.S. alone, and many are living relatively good health and without pain?**

**A.** I was actually shocked by large number of people in their 80s who are healthy. Take Doug, for example, who takes no medications at all and walks several times a week. He did report he only skated on the nearby pond two or thee times last winter. He told me, ‘I am almost embarrassed by my good fortune.’

**Q. Tell us about the five coping skills you found most eightysomethings use when it comes to having unpleasant health issues?**

Eightysomethings use five different coping styles to deal with their health issues. **Deniers** refuse to admit they have problems even though they are obvious. They drive with advance cataracts and ignore severe chest pains. **Stoics** acknowledge they are sick, keep on cheerfully with their regular routines despite pain and sickness. **Complainers** tell anyone who will listen about their diarrhea, their acid reflux, their back pain. They are a small group at my retirement community and people begin to shun the biggest complainers, although it's okay to complain about the weather. The **Worriers** are anxious about getting sick most the time and take their blood pressure every day. **Realists** pay attention to their bodies and how their health but don't dwell on it. Which coping style depends on your usual coping style rather than on the severity of your problems. In *Eightysomethings*, I give specific ways to handle each of the five styles.

**Q. Were you surprised to find that many eightysomethings— despite having dramatic losses and difficult transitions— are unexpectedly happy? You say having good friends is even more important than family relationships. What made you come to that conclusion and what health benefits can having friends bring to people in the last stage of their life?**

**A.** Yes My most important finding is how many eightysomethings are happy—very happy, an 8 or 9 on a scale of 1 to 10 despite many losses and serious problems. Friends are more important than ever in our eighties as usually our parents are long dead, our siblings may live far away, and our children are frantically busy. Many of us make new friends and at last we have time, lots of time, for coffee, walks, lunches. It's fun and it's good for our health. Being isolated and loneliness effects how long you live. We are social being and need others to thrive. Loneliness is enough of a problem that in Great Britain they have established a Minister of Loneliness.

**Q. What advice do you have for Baby Boomers dealing with aging parents? You mention how fraught “Upside Down Parenting” can be when the adult children become more involved in their parents' lives.**

**A.** Use the Conversation Starters in my book to understand your parents wishes for different situations. Remember that parental ties are among the deepest attachment of our lives. When parents become old, frail and approaching death, the feelings adult children have become more intense, and sometimes overwhelming. You may regress.

**Q. Also in your book, *Eightysomethings*, you write that a good way of looking at the entire process of aging, is to see it as a journey to a simpler and a smaller world. What does that journey often entail and how important is your attitude about the personal changes you may need to make such as downsizing?**

**A.** It begins with downsizing and getting rid of stuff. We also literally get smaller. But as we age further into our 80s, we often narrow our worlds— we travel less, we simplify our

lives—happy just to be like one man who lives in North Carolina who sits for hours on his front porch just looking at his garden and the birds.

**Q. You discovered there are gifts reserved for those living into their eighties and nineties. What are these gifts?**

**A.** You give up striving, trying to achieve. At 80, you don't have to stay on committee that are no fun. It is your turn to let others do the work and to let others take care of you. According to King Lear and Shakespeare, old age is the time to tell old tales, to pray and sing and laugh—simply for their enjoyment. You live in the present moment. You no longer make plans for the future. Many eightysomethings feel a new kind of freedom. They tell me they love waking up and saying 'What do I want to do today?' This is new and different from any time earlier in their lives. So there is the gift of time to develop inwardly, allow for the ongoing alchemy. Time to become exactly who you really are. Explore the mysteries when life is less controlled and focused.

**Q. One of the most helpful things in your book are the two sets of questions that you have at the end of each chapter, which features a different and useful topic on living well in the uncharted territory of being 80-plus. One is called Conversation Starters and the other is Tips For Families. What are they designed to do?**

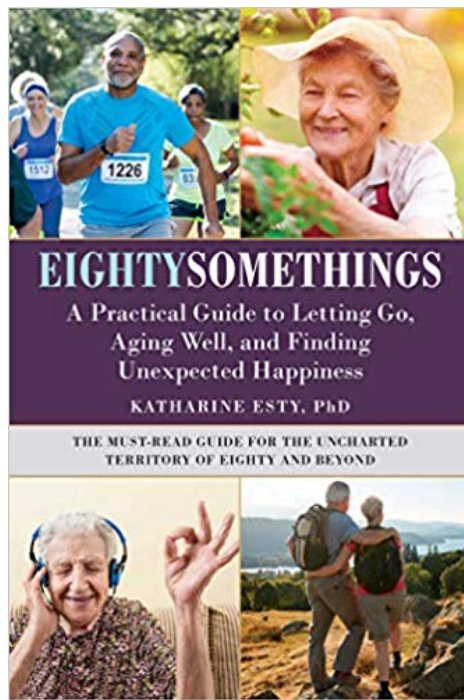
**A.** The Conversations Starters are for the grown children of eightsomethings. These are people in their 50s and 60s and the book is written for them, too. Especially for them. They are so often mystified by their eightysomething parents and don't know how to deal with them. So many things that should be talked about go unsaid. *Eightsomethings* helps you have those deep and meaningful conversations.

**Q. What is the main idea you hope your readers will come away with after they have read your book? I was mesmerized learning that paradoxically many eightysomethings despite their many losses and multiple health issues find themselves naturally living in the present. And even better, they find themselves at peace.**

**A.** The main idea I want people to get from the book is that we do not need to fear getting old. That most people when they are in their eighties, find themselves unexpected happy. This does not mean they have not experienced losses, setbacks and tragedy or that they are not in pain. More than 90% of those I interviewed rated themselves as happy. It is all about attitude. And maybe because of the losses, they can finally be so grateful just to be alive. They can finally enjoy the small things of life like the morning coffee.

**Find more information at [www.katharineesty.com](http://www.katharineesty.com)**

\*Thanks to Carole Marks, host of *A Touch of Grey* radio show, for many interview questions.



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Katharine Esty, PhD  
Skyhorse Publishing paperback, also available as an e-Book  
ISBN: 9781510743199  
\$24.99