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JUNE 2009

\$3.50



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FEEELING 40
my way to

In our continuing series, women on both sides of 40 talk about the joys, challenges, and surprises that come with this milestone birthday.

If one more person tells me to “embrace my age,” I’m gonna lose it. By Stephanie Dolgoff

I should have known better than to try and buy a pair of jeans at this particular store. The pants in the window were so narrow at the ankle that the mannequin’s legs looked like sharpened pencils (yet still somehow cute). Worse, they were cut so low that even if I were able to wedge myself into them, my C-section scar would have been visible over the snap.

So why did I venture in? Consciously, I suppose I thought there might be normal jeans on the sale rack in the back. But I think somewhere, deep in my psyche, I forgot that I was 40, had delivered twins, and would no longer look good in peg-leg pants (if I ever had!).

The salesgal asked if she could help me. “I may be beyond help,” I smiled. “I need jeans, but I don’t think these are for me.” She didn’t even try to disagree. Then she directed me to a store up the street...

a place where they sell pretty clothes in gauzy fibers. But suffice it to say that they don’t even *make* jeans—just those elastic or drawstring-waist slacks that my mom favors. Had things really come to this?

I later relayed the incident to my mother. “You know, you should really try to embrace your age,” she said. “You’ll be much happier when you do.”

I know she’s right, but if one more person tells me to “embrace my age” and the wisdom and sense of calm that come with it, I’m going to have a very public Naomi Campbell moment, during which I’ll assault someone with a handheld electronic device I’ve never learned how to program properly.

And God help you if you tell me I look good “for my age.” But someone probably will, and they’ll mean it as a compliment. A makeup artist told me not long ago, as he spackled concealer under my eyes, that “40 can be fabulous”—with the right moisturizer. Comments like this are designed to make me and others of my demographic feel good.

But they don’t make me feel good, because (aside from the fact that I’m obviously a bit conflicted about getting older) such ideas fuel the Tyranny of the Milestone Birthday, which mandates that there’s a particular way you should be feeling at 40 (or 30 or 50 or 18 or 21). And if you’re not feeling that particular way, there’s something wrong with you. ▶



Dolgoff with her twin girls.

Turning 40 means the birthday tyrants are all over you. Sometimes they're people who've reached a certain age and are trying to figure out their own life in retrospect. They see your turning 40 as an opportunity to spare you their regrets, like the 60-something neighbor of mine who tells me to save more for retirement because he didn't at 40 and now he's screwed. Usually, though, they want to sell you something, like life insurance, or a procedure to restore your "pre-baby" body. They believe that 40 is something you might feel bad about. If you do what they say, you'll feel good again.

The thing is, if you already feel pretty good on balance, as I do, all this embrace-your-age business can be grating. I'm happy and lucky; I have a remarkable husband and smart children, and I get paid to do what I love. But my life isn't perfect, and neither am I—nor will I be, no matter my age. Now that I'm in my 40s, I don't feel significantly more sagacious, at peace, or self-confident—or, for that matter, over-the-hill, beaten down, or wizened than I did when I was 39, 38, 37, or even 32. As my friend Andie (40 last March) puts it, "All year I was steeling myself for how I was going to feel when I turned 40; then I realized the same thing I realize every milestone birthday: Nothing's that different."

Of course, getting older is a big deal. Sometimes, like the first time a polite teenager "ma'ams" you, it can be startling. And it's wonderful that there

are more images of contented, resilient, successful women in their 40s out there today than there were when my mother rounded out her fourth decade. But it's hard enough getting older without having to act like you love every second of it. The main thing I felt when I turned 40 was pressure—the same kind of unhelpful pressure I felt when I was in my 20s to have *the best time ever* because you should "enjoy it while you're young." But instead of having that mythical best time ever, I felt like everyone else was in on some big joke or vital nugget of information that gave them the right amount of youthful insouciance—while I was, as often as not, worried that my shoes were wrong.

So my new motto about aging is "Leave me alone." The truth is, 40 sucks sometimes (two words: *crepey eyelids*). Other times, like when I walk by a bar packed with 20-somethings trying to pick up one another, I feel relieved: I did that already. Now I'm sure I'll have a better time going home, nuking that terrific turkey chili I froze weeks ago, and reading in bed with my husband. And that's not because we don't fight, or because every culinary experiment is a success. It's because being happy has little to do with how old you are and who you're supposed to be and everything to do with feeling what you feel when you feel it—whatever your age. **R**

Stephanie Dolgoff blogs about being too young to be old but too old to be young on formerlyhot.com.

"My new motto about aging is 'Leave me alone.'"

The advice brigade

REDBOOK readers reflect on the words of wisdom—some wise, some not—they received after hitting the big 4-0.



I was newly divorced, and my best friend, who is over 55, told me to never get married again and to stop dating because any man my age would want

a 20-year-old woman, not a 40-year-old. I was offended, crushed, and heartbroken that this person thought so little of me or my worth. I guess this was his old-school male outlook on life. I let his comment go and posted my profile on a dating website. I found the perfect man a couple of years later and did get married again, in 2008! And guess what? My husband loves me just the way I am.

Lesla Thayer, 45, Fruita, CO



When I turned 40, my aesthetician told me to use medical-grade skin-care products, so I am. My fertility doctor informed me of the low

odds of having a baby at 39 and above. We tried fertility treatments for a year with no luck. My investment advisor told me I had lots of time until retirement, not to worry. My mom told me to do what I want to be happy. Everyone else told me I "still looked young." I say, pay attention to the doctors, take the rest with a grain of salt, and revel in the compliments. (I got carded at the liquor store in December, and I'm still smiling.)

Sheri Rice Bentley, 41, Madison, WI



By far, the best advice I got when I turned 40 was from my mother. It was to stop trying to please everyone around me and start pleasing myself. I

decided then and there to be the best "me" I could be. I ate better, cut out red meat, and exercised regularly. I dropped seven pounds and felt smashing! I bought clothes that looked great on my 40-year-old self and got a new hairstyle. These changes led to my being chosen as a "top single" by *St. Louis Magazine*. I met my husband at a party they sponsored in November 2005, and I'm as happy as I've ever been.

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