

Reinventing the Self

On a constantly changing world, these boomers adapt by remaking their bodies, interests, and skill sets—perpetual reinvention.

Boomers adept at reinventing the self are confident in the tumultuous environments of aging, changing their habits, careers, interests, and even bodies to survive. They do not wait until an unanticipated life event mandates change but instead take pre-emptive action to prepare for what the future might hold. These boomers may listen to the advice of professionals but are fundamentally self-directed, seeking the tools, strategies, and transformations that they perceive as most advantageous. While the effects of their choices ripple through their families and social networks, these boomers remain focused on changing what they have the most direct control over: their bodies and their minds.

The basic conflict:

Confidence vs. uncertainty

These boomers adapt to their perceptions of future risks, often investing large amounts of time, money, and even their identity into preparedness. They are confident, but still vulnerable to the nagging uncertainties of what the future will actually bring, and whether their investments in themselves will ultimately prove the best adaptations.

They learn new skills but wonder if they will be the most beneficial in future situations. They wonder if their physical interventions will be sustainable or flexible enough not to compromise their health in the face of unforeseen risk. They invest in preventative health care but wonder if it will be the right kind of prevention ten years in the future. While they don't spend every waking hour stressing about these paradoxes, questions about whether or not they've done the right thing always linger in the backs of their minds.

Lifestage:

Always time for reinvention

While other boomers reinvent themselves at predictable points in their life, these boomers make it a persistent practice, manifesting again and again in different domains of their lives. They are avid re-sequencers—starting families late in life, resisting the biological effects of aging, retraining and starting second and third life pursuits. They embrace new surgeries and technologies, emerging work fields, lifelong learning opportunities, and drastic diets. They attempt to be as agile as possible, ready to adjust where the circumstances require, but usually make adjustments in anticipation of what may come.

Expectations:

Continuous self-improvement

Boomers who reinvent the self appreciate the resources they have used for those reinventions and expect those resources to be available in the future if they're needed again. These boomers are fluent in the workings of lifelong learning institutions: public libraries, universities and city colleges, certificate programs, and online or distance learning courses. The structures that have supported them through their reinventions empower them: churches and study groups, self-help organizations, families, and social networks. They navigate medical and financial institutions to obtain what they want and need. Although these boomers adopt new structures, they will support and fight for those institutions that best served them in the past.

While they rely on external institutions and resources for advice, education, vocational training, and support, these boomers remain internally focused. All of their efforts are in the interest of perfecting the self for the present and, most importantly, the future. These boomers do not maintain multiple identities but instead alter their own identities to confront inevitable change. They are constantly in a state of personal "makeover" and their strength lies in their willingness to accept and adapt to whatever life has to throw at them.



Action Ecology:

Reinventing the Self

The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The outer ring, organized around our seven dimensions of decision making, describe practices and strategies through which boomers put their resources into action. Finally, there are the “decisions in suspension,” questions that these boomers don’t have answers to just yet.

DECISIONS IN SUSPENSION:

- What the next health practice is?
- When to contemplate a new vocation?
- When to invest in current community or to go international?
- Whether to go back to school?
- How to reconsider financial investments?

Global Transparency

Exploring the world

ENGAGING WITH THE GLOBAL

- Willing to explore medical tourism
- Looking forward to international travel for work
- Considering a move abroad

Wealth Generation

Anticipating the unexpected

MITIGATING RISK

- Financial planning
- Pursuing career advancement
- Crafting ten-year plans with milestones
- Investing in preventative health care
- Maintaining multiple forms of insurance

CULTIVATING FAITH

- Joining a new church



PEOPLE

Self
Close friends
Later life partners
Trusted teachers



INFORMATION

Health practitioners
Social networks
Seminars and workshops
Online communities

Resources



CAPITALS

Internal drive for change
Skills for self-reliance
Financial preparedness
Intellectual curiosity
Spirituality



INSTITUTIONS

Medical providers
Learning centers and colleges
(both online and offline)
Self-help organizations
Religious institutions
Libraries

Extended Capacity

Changing body and mind

ADAPTING THE SELF

- Drastically changing diets
- Having preventative or cosmetic surgery
- Training for a new vocation/retraining in a current vocation

Resequencing Life Stages

Nothing is impossible

ENACTING THE NARRATIVE

- Becoming a grandparent

AUTHORING ONE'S PATH

- Pursuing an emerging career field
- Trying unorthodox health practices
- Taking a personal retreat
- Identifying as “single” even when in a relationship

Self-Help 2.0

Optimizing life

BUILDING THE SMART CONSUMER

- Purchasing untraditional medical procedures not covered by insurance
- Vetting products and practices through networks
- Selling and producing products they like

BECOMING A CONNECTED CITIZEN

- Volunteering to bring leadership back to communities

Re-Institutioning

Reusable resources

REPURPOSING THE OLD

- Avidly using public learning resources
- Valuing traditional medical providers
- Finding new connections in religious communities

INVESTING IN THE NEW

- Participating in online communities
- Building new business models
- Pursuing new learning agents for help in reinvention

New Sociability

Harnessing positive communities

BUILDING THE INSTRUMENTAL NETWORK

- New forms of partnering
- Engaging with networks of other people reinventing themselves
- Using social relationships to communicate new identities

The Dimensions of Decision Making

The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of the seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales. We then used these scales to define the action types, each of which represents a unique profile.

Extended Capacity



These boomers adapt themselves to cope with a changing world. Retraining, reframing, and recreating their minds and bodies are their hallmark strategies. They adopt rigorous regimes of exercise, extreme diets, new surgeries, and drugs to enhance their bodies, constantly striving toward the ideal self-image. They demonstrate sensitivities to changes in their environments, but in the end, the decisions they make come back to themselves.

Resequencing Life Stages



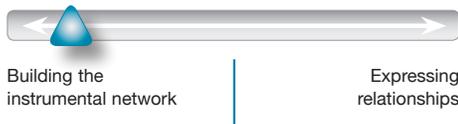
Rather than reacting to specific events, these boomers take their own initiative in resequencing life stages and altering narratives. They assess the changing landscapes around them and choose a path they find satisfying, uninhibited by habit or the limits of their bodies. The timing of their self-interventions shows a reliance on self-direction and internal inspiration, not reactions to cultural narratives.

Self-Help 2.0



When these boomers decide what they want, they know how to get it. They care deeply about the legitimacy of products and services and seek high quality at a reasonable cost. They navigate marketplaces confidently. They are flexible and well informed and have the initiative to become fluent in new areas with remarkable speed. If they don't find or hear what they want, they persist until satisfied.

New Sociability



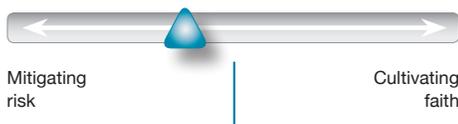
Boomers who reinvent themselves value their relationships and put those relationships to work. They learn about many of their reinvention practices through social networks, which are also used to vet options for providers, products, services, and courses of action.

Re-Institutioning



While these boomers love new things—new careers, processes, technologies, and procedures—they often pursue these through established institutions. While flexible structures of personal and professional networks play a key role in these boomers' decisions, they do not replace the trust and legitimacy of traditional institutions—provided that those institutions continue to meet these boomers' changing needs.

Wealth Generation



Reinvention-oriented boomers are aware of things that might threaten their satisfaction and success. They have gained confidence from their reinventions but guard against financial and health risks, the specter of aging, and the fear of irrelevance. But these fears are secondary to an enduring faith that their interventions will pay off.

Global Transparency



Boomers in this group consistently engage with both national and international personal and professional networks. They maintain stable relationships within their local communities, but they also explore strategies and foster knowledge and relationships on a global scale through online communications. They are technologically savvy insofar as it serves their connectivity purposes.

Profiles & Quotations

Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Reinventing the Self action type. These three personal stories best illustrate the decision-making lens of the action type but are not the only interviewees who shaped the type. The profiles represent actual people and their words, although their names and some details about their lives have been changed to protect their identities.

Cindy Emmett

Age: 47
Rural South

In 1994, after working as a mail clerk for 15 years, the explosion of the Internet inspired Cindy Emmett to go back to school for a computer science degree and start working in the tech industry. She weathered the recession of 2001 with a series of startups, but she sensed a need to gain a better education in order to stay relevant vocationally. In 2002, she took advantage of her company's \$3,000-a-year education subsidy and enrolled in a program online. The same year she became a grandmother, Cindy earned a technology-specific Master's degree. Satisfying her educational desires made her realize a need for spirituality, and she returned to her faith, beginning to attend church regularly again as she had as a child. A year ago, she underwent gastric banding surgery in an attempt to avoid the health problems plaguing her older sister, which would have prevented her from fulfilling her dreams. Cindy lost 70 pounds and describes her health now as "75% better." She has no plans to retire, instead pushing her career as far as she can by constantly refining and updating her skill set. Her week is organized around exercise, work, being a grandparent, and enjoying the small amounts of food she can eat.

On reinvention and the future:

"I'm all about continual self improvement. I view it as just continuing what I've already started ... And I don't want to be at this stage in my life where I am right now and not have a clue or an idea where I was gonna be in the next ten or 20 years... The next ten years are going to be more exploring, and then the latter ten years will be more, I envision, of enjoying the core things that I've found that I want to do."

On managing health:

"I knew I had to do something about my weight and my health because I've got a lot of plans. I can't have these future plans if my health isn't very good. Now I work out just about every day at the Y and stay as active as I can and plan on continuing that. I follow all of the instructions from my surgeon ... I don't hesitate to go to the doctor, although I don't want to necessarily take a lot of things."

On work as the key to mobility:

"I don't see myself staying here. I see myself making a move. My company [has] offices here and then we have one in Cambridge. And there's one in New York. We actually have offices around the world ... so there are endless possibilities. I don't ever envision not working. Retirement, no, not gonna happen. And research says there's gonna be a huge shortage of qualified workers at that time so my skills and ability should be at a premium."



Source: flickr.com/peterkaminski

Trudy Klein

Age: 59
Urban Rocky Mountains

Trudy Klein worked as a high-powered corporate sales representative before becoming dissatisfied with her work environment and the high-stress lifestyle her job demanded. She tried a few different things before a friend drew her into a series of workshops held by an international self-improvement organization, which gave her a new lens through which to consider how to organize her relationships and personal goals. The same friend introduced her to a networked-marketing business that sells personal care products. Now she balances her self-directed work at that business with part-time work at a local computer store, where she feels connected to young people and new trends. She has reinvented her body several times through exercise regimes and health products. She now lives with her boyfriend in a fashionable urban area in Colorado. Trudy relies on traditional medicine—available through her boyfriend's health insurance—for preventative testing and regular checkups. She is only marginally satisfied with the quality of her care, believing that she knows what she wants and needs better than her doctor. The next thing on the horizon is getting a Master's degree in Public Health, a move motivated by a desire for professional growth.



Source: IFTF

Liz Gallagher

Age: 54

Urban Midwest

On being passionate about wellness:

“When I was growing up, I was a little fat girl. When I was really young, my life was all about deprivation. So I started swimming for fitness and changed my whole body, changed my whole life. And it took years of understanding and education and that’s probably why I’m so passionate about wellness; it’s because I went through that ... I focus on wellness and I help people who want to create a healthier lifestyle and who also want to create financial health.”

On preparing for the future:

“I’m moving forward. I’m not at the point where I have enough residual income that I could just walk away and do nothing. But I personally believe that through my network-marketing business, through my investments and managing them properly—and being aware and being cautious—I should be okay.”

On directing one's health care:

“My doctor—first of all, I’m too healthy for her, she doesn’t really know what to do. I know what I want ... I want bone density tests because I know that because of my previous experience of being the little fat girl and yo-yo diets, I did not develop the bone structure that I could have.”

On writing your own narrative:

“With the advanced course, the concept is that you’re designing your life. Then you explore how to take what you’re creating and designing and create leadership within your communities ... A major thing I learned was that most everything we have in our mind is a story that we’ve made up and that I can make up happy stories as opposed to bad stories. Because who knows? I mean it’s just a story!”

After leaving a career as a corporate communications manager, Liz Gallagher pursued a Ph.D. in Education. Combining a rediscovered passion of youth with the Ph.D. she earned this year, she plans to leverage her reinvention toward resurrecting music education in public schools. While making educational and professional improvements, she also made adjustments in another domain of her life. From a junk-food lover attempting to control her weight with a diet of hard candies and popcorn, to a health-conscious cook creating whole meals with fresh ingredients, Liz overhauled her diet, leaving years of poor nutrition and a chubby body behind her. Invigorated by her healthier new body, and inspired by her sister and neighbor’s experiences, she started a course of anti-aging hormone treatments that her new doctor tells her will make her feel young again. Although she has always identified as a single person, she and her boyfriend of eight years are considering the possibility of moving in together.

On overcoming nagging uncertainties:

“I knew I needed something new ... I wanted to do it, but I had a lot of fears. And then when I did go back to work, it was part-time, and I was scared to death. How [was] I going to continue this [pace of school] and work too? And it worked out just fine because I was doing a different program and it wasn’t near the stress level that my previous job was.”

On reinventing her diet:

“I’m much more conscious of healthy eating ... I eat very little—almost no—meat, and that’s not because I’m a vegetarian. There’s fat in it, and there’s a lot of calories, and if I don’t even like it anyway, why eat it? No candies, of course, at all ... Sugar is, to me, the opiate of the masses. It really is. It’s a drug. You become addicted to it ... I’m just discovering [cooking] so I’m having a great time.”

On connecting with the anti-aging movement:

“Word of mouth. Then all my friends have been suffering, you start telling them. The minute you start telling them about your energy and how good you feel, and then you throw in how great your sex life is, they’re like all ears—because that’s gone. It’s ‘going, going, gone’ if you don’t do something about it.”

On finding a satisfying philosophy:

“My grandfather lived to be over 100. When he was 100, he was still going to work every day. He had three careers in his life—30-year careers, each of them. He was amazing. So, I sort of go by his philosophy. I want to keep doing something, working somehow, most of my life.”



Source: flickr.com/missshari

Decisions in Context

At a glance

Self-reinventing boomers are prepared to make drastic decisions when it comes to anticipating the future. They are willing to listen to professional advice, but will only act if they feel it's in their best interest to do so. They are committed to balancing tenacity with flexibility and readiness with spontaneity.

Work:

Worth a premium

Far from planning their retirement, these boomers are looking to the next satisfying vocational endeavor. As their peers retire en masse, self-reinventing boomers who have already engaged in several lines of work are ready to find new value and meaning from work, combining their past experience with new training and education. They carefully plan their working-life reinventions, anticipating society's future needs while fulfilling a personal passion. Working is something they enjoy because it is a venue for expanding knowledge and skills. While their emphasis on bodily reinvention has its own value, it is in part a prerequisite and an integral part of their long-term career ambitions.

Housing:

Here today, gone tomorrow

Even when comfortable in their current homes and neighborhoods, this group of boomers sees many possibilities for moving on. Some consider international travel or even expatriation in order to expand their educational and professional horizons. For others, mobility lies on more modest scales—moving to an urban condo with a partner, or relocating to a major urban center. Housing can sometimes be the focus of reinvention, but it is always lower on the list of priorities than interventions into their bodies and skills.

Food:

A new body, a new joy

These boomers have experienced dramatically different relationships with food over the course of their lives. Although not necessarily a given with boomers of this action type, weight loss factors dramatically in the lives of most of these boomers, accompanied by the revelation of a love of good food. The joys of simple cooking, rich flavors, and the rituals of eating are relatively new and very intense for them. They give a lot of thought to the components of food and how it affects their bodies, their health, and their overall energy and productivity. They focus on small quantities, freshness, and quality, which translate into daily shopping trips that punctuate their routines.

Finances:

Financing continual self-improvement

Reinvention-focused boomers have invested quite a bit of capital into their bodies, their educations, and often their health. It's a gamble: They hope and believe that these investments will help them secure enjoyable lifestyles over the coming decades. They have financed their self-improvement efforts through savings from their former careers in stressful fields, and sometimes through the support of parents and partners. Their experiences have given them confidence to use the resources available to get what they need—from employers, markets, and various levels of government assistance. However, they are always wary of uncertainty and take an active role in managing the assets they have.

Health:

Exceeding expectations

Both in reality and identity, these boomers are healthier than they—and the medical institutions that serve them—ever expected. After observing their siblings' and peers' ill health, and struggling with health issues and risks of their own, they have taken drugs, used devices, undergone surgery, and overhauled their lifestyle to ensure optimal health for as long as possible. They are committed to understanding the risks they face and will push for any preventative intervention they feel will ensure them the long life that will allow them to realize their ambitions. They respect traditional medical advice and value its legitimacy, even as they pursue alternatives that seem promising and sensible to them. They will, however, argue and fight for what they want, seeking second opinions, paying out of pocket, even going overseas as medical tourists if they feel it is to their advantage.