

# Successful aging: What is it and how can you achieve it?

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# Defining successful aging

- Successful aging is **multifaceted**- it encompasses the physical, social, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of growing older
- Pillars of successful aging
  - **Low probability of disease and disease-related disability**-absence of disease and minimizing your risk of disease- preventative and ameliorative
  - **High cognitive and functional levels**-what you can do and what you could do on an everyday basis to maintain health/vitality, prevent decline, maintain and enhance physical/cognitive vitality
  - **Active engagement with life** -meaningful interpersonal relationships and contact with others- socioemotional selectivity with age
  - **Positive spirituality**-community-focused and individual in nature, related to but distinct from religion-positive behaviors, unifying with others, life enhancing



# Questions to Ask

- **Do you have a plan to age well?**
- **What are your goals as they relate to each pillar of successful aging?**
- **What barriers do you see for yourself in reaching these goals?**
- Does our culture, your everyday environment, routines, hurt or help in your efforts to define for yourself what your wishes and goals for aging well are?
- **Who are your role models? Friends? Family? Famous people?**
- Could you age well despite poor health, disability, dependence on others, being alone?
- Could you age well if you resided in a long term care facility?
- Does heredity determine aging? Are the choices you make important as well? What about relationships? Your personal qualities?
- **Does everyone age in the same way? Is it really downhill? Is aging modifiable?**

# Your knowledge and attitude is important!

- View your own aging in the context of the entirety of your own life-no one age period is most important
- You age in many ways and for many reasons
- Aging does not equal decline
- Normal and abnormal aging are different
- As you age, your age becomes less important as a barometer of who you are, what you can do (e.g., 65)
- This is because of the “fan effect”- differential life experience creates this diversity with increased age
- Different generations age differently
- Aging is not fixed-it can be modified-it is a process

# Your own aging

- Persons age gradually and define themselves as “older” –**your subjective age-given:**
- **Life events** (elected, surprises, nonevents, double whammies) and **triggers** account for this. We are by definition different as well, and react to life events differently.
- **Triggers** - **physical**/body aches and pains, **mortality**/death of age peers, **generational**-death of parent/GP, **contextual**-being senior at work

# Being stereotyped as old

- **Stereotypes=generalizations** (pos. or neg.), yet they one can always find someone who fits the stereotype of an old person
- **Being stereotyped is harmful to your self esteem and functioning** (stereotype threat) even if you are unaware of it
- **Our culture is ageist**, we emphasize being a member of a generation (e.g. Baby Boomers, Millennials)and not our individuality- ageism is taken less seriously than other “isms”

# Being Stereotyped as old

- **Interacting with others who are different than you is healthy**-you are less likely to internalize stereotypes that are harmful-you will no longer feel invisible or unimportant
- **Either avoid or confront ageist people who use ageist language** (microaggressions)-change the language, be your own best advocate!



# Qualities Key to Aging Well

- **Being both independent and dependent**-we do not age in a vacuum-having a confidant is important
- **Feeling personally empowered**-being proactive, making choices/decisions based upon YOUR needs / wants (versus what others want)
- **Selecting (narrowing), Optimizing (expertise) = Compensating for loss**
- **Being resilient in the face of change and loss**-being able to rise above adversity-being able to share your grief with others who can listen without judging you
- **Being flexible**-sometimes it is better not to change (assimilators) and sometimes it is better to change (accommodators)- *The Serenity Prayer*

# Qualities Key to Aging Well

- **Being able to seek emotional and instrumental support from others** without giving up your own independence
- **Being able to ask for help when you need it-** e.g., for every 10 yrs of caregiving, you lose 1 year of life, seeking help for depression, anxiety, problems with others, being physically , financially, or emotionally abused, health difficulties
- **Seeking out variety**-cognitive stimulation and cognitive reserve-avoiding social isolation and loneliness
- **Greater variety of activities and relationships** is linked to better morale, quality of life, longevity
- **Greater openness to experience, less neuroticism** is related to aging well

# Qualities Key to Aging Well

- **Maximize *protective factors* (an umbrella in a rainstorm) that prevent decline and unhappiness with life, negativity about the future**
  - **Better health/more everyday physical activity (Health Belief Model-feeling vulnerable motivates behavior)**
  - **More education/lifelong learning-cognitive reserve**
  - **Accurately appraising your life situation, your skills, outcomes**
  - **Social support** -formal, emotional, instrumental- feeling connected vs. emotional loneliness “No one cares about what you used to do”

# Protective factors

- **Eating well/staying active**-*Mediterranean diet* (high in proteins, low in fats/carbs-berries, fish, chicken, nuts-re: cardiovascular illness, cancer, diabetes, obesity), getting adequate sleep, remaining active
- **Developing self confidence/self efficacy**-taking risks-start small and go from there-degrees of failure make us stronger and allow us to know what to work on (e.g. using unused skills, developing new skills)

# Generational Stereotypes-Avoid them!

- **AARP Disrupt Aging**-“changing the conversation”-Jo Ann Jenkins-examine your own attitudes toward aging in general and toward your own aging (**Reframing Aging Initiative-Gerontological Society of America**)
- **How do you feel when people make generalizations solely on someone’s age?** Is age segregation (nursing homes, senior centers, senior living) necessarily a good idea? Upside? Downside? **A cultural double bind.** In the extreme, these can promote **microaggressions**

# Ageism

- Do you find yourself saying these very things to yourself about you or others? By being sensitive to ageism you create more equity
- **EVERYDAY AGEISMS-undermine our mental and emotional health e.g., “She’s too young/old to be doing that”** (Jeopardy host, Biden age)
  - “He’s never going to fit in here-he should be with people his own age”

# Everyday Ageisms

- “A woman is unlike a bottle of wine-she tends to get sour and bitter with age” (greeting card)
- “When are you going to retire? You’re still coming in every day? Step aside and make room for some younger blood”
- “Can I help you with that sir?”
- “You can’t do anything about aging, so why fight it? Go with the flow”
- “Are you a “senior” ? An “elderly adult?” An “adult”?
- “Wouldn’t you be happier with people your own age?”
- “She’s doing .....?” (Running a marathon? Getting married? Going back to work?)
- “A woman (or man) my age should always/never do that?”
- “I’m too old to learn this”
- Other examples?

# Take Home Do-isms-action-oriented

- Spend time each day **cultivating positive emotions**-awe, wonder, gratitude, happiness, joy
- Spend time each day **visualizing and journaling what each dimension of aging well would look like for you**
- Spend time each day **thinking about something good that happened to someone else (look at a little baby and smile “Aah!”),**
- **everyday kindnesses** (pay it forward, pay a stranger a compliment, give someone money who needs it)



# Take home do-isms

- Spend time each day **defining your sense of purpose** and service to others e.g. volunteering
- Spend time each day **visualizing what your life would be like without people you love**. Then appreciate them as part of your life
- Spend time each day **listening to music, walking, or just being** - without a task to be done or a goal to be met
- Spend time each day **together simply enjoying one another's presence (or reminiscing, looking at photos)**

# Take Home Messages

- **Become knowledgeable about the aging process-** normal vs. abnormal aging, aging as a lifelong process
- **Age proactively-**you define what aging is and will be for you- not **others-aging well takes effort-age in a mindful way**
- **Age becomes less and less of a barometer** of success and happiness as we get older-do not define yourself solely on the basis of age/question others' doing it
- **Do not buy into stereotypes of aging-**be sensitive to and critical of **everyday ageisms- THIS IS EMPOWERING-older adults should be treated equitably**

# Take home messages

- **Be realistic but positive about growing older- being old is one thing-acting old is quite another**-the outside and the inside need not parallel one another
- **Strive to create a good “fit” with your everyday environment**-if this fit is hurtful, change your environment to improve it-work toward changing the culture too
- **Make the most** of your resources, abilities, interests and skills
- **Foster your network of support** from others-your personal convoy
- **Be present-oriented**, not past-oriented. **Have hope for the future** as a wonderful experience yet to be

# Take Home Messages

- **Aging is not a test that you pass or fail-strive to age as well as you can in light of your resources, personal qualities, and relationships with others**
- Stress the positive: More “do-isms”-take action
- Do more of whatever makes you happy
- Do something that makes you move
- Do something that makes you think
- Do something that makes a friend
- Do something that feeds your spirit
- Have something to believe in
- Have something to hope for
- Have something to do
- Have someone to love