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

- 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?

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 and decisions based upon YOUR needs and wants (versus what others want)
- **Selecting, Optimizing, Compensating**
- **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 (accomodators)- 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 or emotionally abused, health difficulties
- **Seeking out variety** - cognitive stimulation and cognitive reserve - avoiding social isolation and loneliness
- **Greater variety of activities and relationships** linked to better morale, quality of life, longevity
- **Greater openness to experience, less neuroticism** is related to aging well

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Qualities Key to Aging Well

- **Maximize protective factors that prevent decline and unhappiness with life, negativity about the future**
  - Better health/more everyday physical activity (Health Belief Model)
  - More education/lifelong learning - cognitive reserve
  - Accurately appraising the past, present, and future
  - Appreciation of the cultural context that defines aging well for some persons (e.g. filial piety, having successfully raised children, being a respected elder within the community, being balanced or integrated)
  - **Social support** - formal, emotional, instrumental - feeling connected vs. emotional loneliness “No one cares about what you used to do”
  - **Eating well/staying active** - Mediterranean diet (high in proteins, low in fats/carbs-berris, fish, chicken, nuts-re: cardiovascular illness, cancer, diabetes, obesity)
  - **Developing self confidence/self efficacy** - taking risks - start small and go from there - degrees of failure makes us stronger and allows us to know what to work on
Stereotypes of Aging

- Stereotypes=generalizations=ageism can be positive or negative
- Us vs. them/in-group vs. outgroup mentality
- Stereotypes vary with self vs. others as targets
- One can always find someone who fits a stereotype of older adult as rigid, sick, incompetent, depressed, demented, etc.
- Stereotypes conflict with increased individual variability /the “fan effect” and increased variability within persons as they age
- That someone has internalized a stereotype is evidenced by the impact of stereotype threat on them (YA who engage in more risky behaviors driven by fears of aging and death)
- Anyone regardless of age can be stereotyped- an everyday occurrence for many persons
- It should be taken as seriously as racism, sexism, or discrimination regarding one’s gender identity

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
- **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?
- Do you find yourself saying these very things to yourself about you or others?
- **EVERYDAY AGEISMS**-undermine our mental and emotional health
  - “She’s too young to be doing that”
  - “He’s never going to fit in here-he should be with people his own age”
Everyday Ageisms

- “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”
- “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?”
- “Wouldn’t you be happier with people your own age?”

• Other examples?

Young vs. Old in Our Culture

• Generational differences emphasized over similarities
  - Distrust, anger, guilt, isolation/escape, resentment, misunderstandings are common-lack of contact with others who are different is key
  - Being aware of others’ value systems has both an upside and a downside- (empathy vs. perception of separateness)
  - Is an awareness of generational issues a good thing?
  - Tendency to label others as being a member of a given generation (e.g. Baby Boomers vs. Millennials)
  - To what extent do you allow yourself to be labeled as a member of Generation__?
  - How can our culture create opportunities to age well/change others’ negative /inaccurate perceptions of aging
    • Physical and mental decline go hand in hand, forgetfulness/senior moments, rigidity
Triggers for Aging

• Key to subjective aging (how you feel inside)
• Correlate with life transitions/life events (e.g. elected, surprises, nonevents, life on hold, sleepers, double whammies)
• Triggers:
  – Mortality (death of age peers)
  – Bodily (aches and pains)-thresholds vary across and within persons
  – Generational (death of parents, becoming a grandparent)
  – Contextual (becoming a senior employee)
• Aging is a process, not an outcome
• Each varies with individuals and is shaped by experience

Viewing Aging as a Life Span Process

• The entirety of the lifespan is important
• Change is multidimensional (aging occurs across many aspects of life)
• Change is multidirectional (growth, decline, stability co-exist within the same person over time)
• Causes of age-related change are many
  – Age graded, history-graded, nonnormative
  – Age becomes less important as a measure of most things as we get older
  – Different cohorts/generations age differently
• Aging is not a fixed process, it varies across persons (it is pluralistic)
Do-isms

- 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
- Spend time each day defining your sense of purpose and service to others
- 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

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 buy into stereotypes of aging**- be sensitive to and critical of everyday ageisms
- **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 that fit
- **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
More 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”
- 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