THOUGHTS ON AGING WELL

Deborah Fleming, PhD, UW College of Health Sciences,
Director of the Wyoming Geriatric Education Center

What I Have Learned from Older Adults about Successful Aging:

- Look to the future. Those who are “future oriented” have good things to anticipate.
- Keep learning. There are many opportunities to attend seminars, classes, or hands-on learning experiences. Look to your local community college or university, senior center, library, church or consider Elderhostel (is both national and international); learn on-line or from others in person. Challenge yourself by tackling a new topic.
- Be optimistic, and try to keep a sense of humor about your aging journey. Resilience is built from turning a negative life experience into a learning opportunity.
- Care about others. Those who volunteer do better in late life, on many levels.
- Above all, have a passion. It can be a passion for literature, music, sports, a hobby, and is different for each individual. Passions usually involve learning, either lifelong learning or late-life learning. A passion can trump other aspects of life, and can compensate for limitations of health, income, and social networks. Life must have a purpose.

What Researchers and Other Experts are Saying:

- Nurture and cherish your brain. It is dynamic, flexible, malleable, constantly reorganizing. It is possible to adopt a proactive, or “comprehensive brain health” lifestyle.
- Your brain needs to be fed well with “brain” foods, and also nourished by oxygen and chemicals from exercising (aerobic exercise is best). Exercise can increase cognitive performance and brain volume, and help ward off cognitive deterioration and brain atrophy.
- It needs to be soothed by spirituality: Meditating, praying, practicing tai chi, doing yoga. This can aid your nervous system.
- It needs you to pay attention to the role of stress in your life. Some stress is beneficial. It keeps you motivated. The key is not how much stress you can endure, but how you manage that stress to keep it from becoming dis-stress.
- Your brain needs to engage in creativity. This is especially beneficial if it involves invention, improvisation or performance (going public, the research shows, helps build feelings of self-mastery). The creative arts are good for the heart and soul, if they involve learning of new skills, socialization, a stimulating environment, mental challenge and physical movement.
- The use of technology is changing our brains, even as it changes our lives. There are beneficial on-line interactive brain games.
- There are ways to evaluate a brain fitness program; consumer checklists have been developed to assist in selecting a good program.
• As Ben Franklin asserted: “Moderation in all things.” Too much of any good intervention can become a negative. Common sense needs to prevail, so “know thyself.”

What All Of This Might Mean for our Children and Grandchildren

• Quality of life in later years is influenced by early childhood education and attitudes about learning. It is important to read to children, take them to a library, and model life-long learning.
• Years of formal and informal education affect the development of “cognitive” or “brain” reserve, which appears to be a protective factor against Alzheimer’s disease.
• Learning of a second language also contributes to better cognition and less risk of dementia in late life.
• Playing an instrument might also stave off cognitive decline in old age. A new study showed that older people who had played a musical instrument for a decade or longer scored higher on cognitive tests.
• Helping the younger generation develop resiliency (being flexible, rising above adversity, learning from mistakes and misfortunes) will contribute to their well-being in later life.

Works Cited:


