



Expression

Bulletin of the National Advisory Council on Aging

Successful aging

When the late French singer Maurice Chevalier was asked by a reporter on his 80th birthday what it was like to be 80, he is said to have replied: "It's better than the alternative!"

For more and more people, growing older is an attractive prospect and a definite possibility.

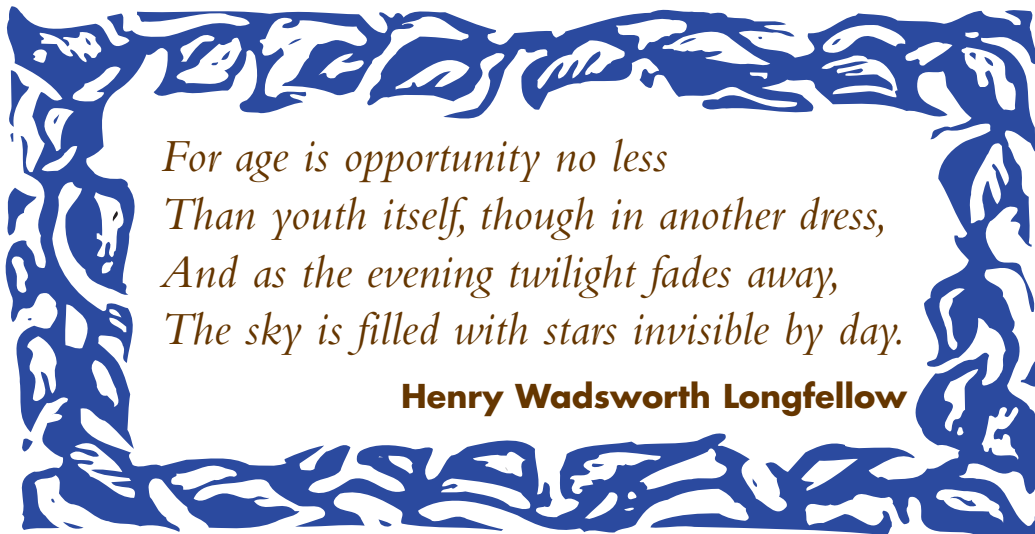
Successful aging isn't limited to the super-seniors we sometimes hear about – the kind who complete a PhD at age 75 or take up skydiving at 90. It's not an "all or nothing" concept. Successful aging is a realistic goal for all people because it not only describes an ideal in terms of physical, mental and social functioning, it also recognizes that people can adapt very well when

individual circumstances change. Keeping positive attitudes and making the most of one's situation – including adapting to unpredictable setbacks and disabilities and adjusting one's priorities – count as

successful aging.

In this issue of Expression, NACA explores the ideal of "successful aging" and the means to achieve it. It's an

ideal not only for seniors. Individual action needs to rely on support from families, communities and governments to create the conditions that facilitate it. Our entire society stands to benefit from the well-being and continued social participation of aging Canadians.



*For age is opportunity no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress,
And as the evening twilight fades away,
The sky is filled with stars invisible by day.*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

"Bubs" Coleman
NACA Member





NACA

The National Advisory Council on Aging consists of up to 18 members from all parts of Canada and all walks of life. The members bring to Council a variety of experience and expertise to advise the federal Minister of Health, his colleagues and the public on the situation of seniors and the measures needed to respond to the aging of the Canadian population. Current NACA members are:

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■ Myth and reality

Most people probably think of aging as a gradual physical decline from middle age onward, eventually matched by a slowing down of the ability to learn or perform intellectually. According to this view, seniors inevitably become frailer, sicker and more dependent as they get older. A big problem with this conventional way of thinking is that there are great variations among people: some seniors experience fewer losses than others of the same age, and some seniors continue to function better than many younger people.

Part of the explanation for these individual differences is biological: differences in people's genes influence the rate at which physical and mental functions change with age as well as individual life expectancy. But only about 30% of aging can be explained by biology. This means that most of the changes that occur with age are associated with other factors – diet and exercise habits, alcohol and tobacco consumption, psychological traits, and the presence or absence of support from family and friends. Over many years, positive factors contribute to maintaining a high level of functioning and negative factors contribute to decline. There's a message of hope in this observation: by changing damaging behaviours and conditions, we can improve our prospects for successful aging.

■ What is successful aging?

According to experts, a person is aging successfully if he/she:

- has a low risk of disease-related disability;
- has a high level of mental and physical functioning;
- is actively engaged with life; and
- can adapt to change and compensate for limitations.

Individual lifestyle plays a big role in preventing, delaying or coping with some of the common diseases and disabilities that emerge in later life and in maintaining a high level of



Many people are surprised to learn that Edmonton resident Lyman Matthews is 94. Despite some health problems, such as an irregular heartbeat and an auto-immune disorder, he works out three times a week at the YMCA. A widower, he maintains an active social life singing in a choir that entertains seniors in hospitals, lodges and gatherings. Friends are inspired by his upbeat attitude to life: "A lot of us guys get crabby as we get older, but not Lyman."

Source: Chris Zdeb, "Regular exercise, healthy diet keep nonagenarian spry". *Edmonton Journal*. Printed in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Monday, August 30, 2004.

functioning. Although it's preferable to adopt a healthy lifestyle at an early age and keep it for life, it's never too late to change and to reap the benefits of healthier living. Surprising improvements can be made, even very late in life.

Lifestyle is very strongly influenced by outside factors, such as the people we associate with, where we live and the services that are provided to enable seniors to age well. Local communities, the voluntary sector and all levels of government therefore have roles to play in creating the conditions that make successful aging more likely for individuals. The **Elder Friendly Communities** is a grass-roots program in Calgary that brings together seniors and local agencies to develop the friendly, supportive, safe and accessible neighbourhoods that promote successful aging. The **Council on Aging**

of **Ottawa**, inspired by the motto "What's good for seniors is good for the whole community," joined with provincial and municipal partners in 2002 to carry out a comprehensive program entitled *Successful Aging Ottawa*. The aim is to create a local community where all older citizens can enjoy inclusion, safety, integration, engagement and choice. When the conditions are favourable, people have the resources and incentives to stay healthy and engaged and to cope successfully with limitations and changes.

■ Let's get physical

Physical fitness is one aspect of health that truly **is** affected by the aging process; inevitably muscles weaken and shrink, walking becomes slower, aerobic capacity decreases and flexibility and balance are reduced. A sedentary lifestyle accentuates these normal physical losses. But the good news is that regular physical activity slows the rate of decline and can even restore some lost capacity.

At 68 years of age, bedridden with severe osteoporosis, Eleanor Mills undertook to walk again through exercising. She challenged herself to take a few steps every day. Thanks to her perseverance, a good diet and medical supervision, Eleanor saw her bone density increase by 20%. Using a walker, she went from a few steps to... marathons. At 81, she was leading 5-kilometre walks across the country to raise funds to combat osteoporosis!

Source: *The Safe Living Guide*. Health Canada, 2003.



The benefits of physical activity are impressive. Regular exercise offers some protection against various cancers, heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, diabetes and Alzheimer Disease.

It can even negate other risk factors that

threaten health. For instance, a person who smokes and has high blood pressure, but who is physically fit, is at lower risk than someone with normal blood pressure who is a “couch potato”. Exercise can reduce depression, stress, and the likelihood of falls. It helps to maintain healthy body weight and muscle mass, and provides a sense of increased control over one’s life. Physical activity makes activities of everyday living easier and helps persons with chronic disease, such as diabetes, osteoporosis or arthritis, manage their conditions better.

Friends and family can encourage seniors to be physically active by leading active lives themselves. Communities can provide parks, walking paths, safe neighbourhoods, snow removal and good street lighting as well as local recreational programs. Long-term care facilities can incorporate physical activity programs as part of their daily activities; strength or resistance training in these settings is particularly beneficial.

■ A matter of mind

One of the biggest fears of growing older is losing mental capacity, leading to loss of independence, control and choice. Psychological research reveals that loss in

Some lessons from centenarians

Based in part on a study of seniors aged 100+ in the Boston area, here are 6 key ways to live a long and successful life, listed by the acronym “AGEING”.

1. **Attitude:** be optimistic, assertive, outgoing and sociable.
2. **Genes:** choose your parents well: 30% of aging is due to genetic make-up.
3. **Exercise:** regular physical activity contributes to vitality and quality of life.
4. **Interests:** do new and different things, especially things that challenge you intellectually, to keep your mind in shape.
5. **Nutrition:** eat nutritious food and maintain a healthy body weight. A little alcohol is good too.
6. **Get rid of smoking:** this is VERY important; a few people are not affected by smoking, but most smokers live shorter and sicker lives.

Source: Thomas Perls, “Forty Forever.” Unpublished keynote presentation to the Canadian Association on Gerontology, Montréal, October, 2002.



some intellectual abilities is natural as people age. However, these normal declines in the capacity to learn and remember shouldn't interfere with daily functioning or threaten independence. Many intellectual abilities can be maintained at a high level and some loss can even be restored.

People who have a good level of education, good cardiovascular fitness and a strong belief in their ability to handle various situations are most likely to retain high mental functioning. Engaging in activities that are new and intellectually challenging stimulates the creation of new nerve connections in the brain. Stimulating activities include reading, discussing current events, playing chess, bridge or scrabble, doing crossword puzzles, or taking a class for personal interest. Continuing to work can also be a way of remaining intellectually alert. Learning and memory can be improved with specific training and practice at all ages.

Governments and communities can foster seniors' continued mental sharpness in many ways. These include: eliminating mandatory retirement, creating opportunities and incentives for interesting paid and unpaid work, promoting learning

in social and recreational programs and facilitating seniors' access to cultural institutions.

■ Connected and engaged



People who remain actively engaged in life and socially connected to those around them are happier, in better physical and mental health and more able to cope with change than those who are less engaged and connected. Social isolation increases the risk of poor health, whereas the presence of supportive social relations (family, friends, participation in local organizations or church groups) has a positive effect on health.

Productive activity, either alone or with others, is a form of social engagement. Being productive can mean earning money, but there are many other ways of contributing through formal volunteering or informally helping others. Providing support can have great individual benefits

The late **Honourable Mitchell Sharp** remained thoroughly connected and engaged until his death in 2004. After a distinguished career as a senior public servant, then as an elected official and Cabinet minister, he accepted a position as special advisor to the Prime Minister when he was in his 80s. Twice a widower, he married for the third time at age 89. An accomplished pianist, he performed at social gatherings until a few months prior to his death. Unable to be idle, Sharp was still entertaining job offers until his brief and final illness at the age of 92.



because giving to others makes people feel needed and valued.

Communities have an important role to play in fostering socialization and promoting engagement.

music and practiced more often. Because his fingers could not move as quickly across the keyboard, he made slower movements even slower to increase the contrast between fast and slow tempo.

Seniors can adapt well to general “crisis” situations, and coping with stress can actually contribute to successful aging. Manitoba researchers studying seniors who had been affected by the 1997 Red River flood² found that those who had sufficient time to prepare for the crisis coped well, despite the increased stress and anxiety they experienced. Researchers also observed that intellectual functioning and self-reported health actually improved for seniors who were most exposed to the crisis situation.

■ Making the best of life

Limitations and losses do occur as people age and diseases happen. Adapting is an important aspect of successful aging because it allows seniors to continue to exercise control of their lives and maintain their well-being. Two researchers¹ have described how seniors adapt to declining capacities by a process of “selection, optimization and compensation” (*selection* refers to limiting yourself to what you are able to do successfully; *optimization* means working harder and emphasizing what you can do rather than what you can’t; and *compensation* means doing things differently). They illustrate the process by referring to **Arthur Rubenstein**, the celebrated concert pianist who continued to perform well into his 80s. To offset a poorer memory, Rubenstein limited his performance repertory to fewer pieces of

For Paul Wong, former NACA member and a professor at Trinity Western University in B.C., “The untold story of successful aging is about positive attitudes towards life and death, about the spiritual and existential quest, and about personal growth, wisdom and spirituality.” As seniors themselves testify, looking forward to simple joys each day, being grateful, having faith and caring for others are all part of aging well, regardless of one’s physical condition.

Source :

www.meaning.ca/articles/successful_aging.htm

¹ Baltes, PB and Baltes, MM. *Successful Aging: Perspectives from the Behavioural Sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

² Havens, B., and Hall, M. *Experiences of Older Manitobans with the 1997 Red River Flood*. Report submitted to Manitoba Health.



■ “Successful aging” according to seniors

In most research on the topic, success has been defined by the researchers rather than by seniors themselves. Indeed, defining success as the absence of disease and continued high physical and mental functioning and engagement boils down to saying that the person who ages *best* is the one who ages *least*. Seniors themselves have a broader understanding of what it means to age successfully that reflects their personal experience and values.

Differences in socio-economic conditions colour seniors' perception of successful aging. For people with higher income, success is defined as an attitude of serenity concerning the decline associated with aging. According to Pauline, 75, it's "keeping your spirits up and accepting unavoidable losses". For seniors of modest means, success is being content with the necessities. Rita, 69, expresses that point of view: "Someone who ages well is someone who doesn't envy others."

Source : Suzanne Laberge et al. (2003). *Les conceptions du bien-vieillir d'aînées de milieux favorisés et défavorisés. Revue québécoise de psychologie, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2004.*

California researchers³ recently concluded that when success is based on seniors' own definitions



rather than definitions limited to absence of disease, level of functioning and engagement, a higher percentage of seniors were aging successfully. They also noted that many with chronic diseases felt they were successful while others with no chronic disease rated themselves as not successful. University of Manitoba researchers reported twenty different meanings of successful aging given by a large group of Canadian senior men.⁴ Besides good physical and mental health and engagement in life, these senior men felt success included things like loving relationships, graceful acceptance of change, moderate living, having goals and a sense of humour (one man in the study quipped: "I don't know yet, I'm only 85.") Most important, seniors who rated themselves as aging successfully were happy.

³ Strawbridge, W. and Wallhagen, M. "Self-rated successful aging: Correlates and predictors." In L. Poon, S. Gueldner and B. Sprouse (eds). *Successful aging and adaptation with chronic diseases*. New York: Springer, 2003

⁴ Tate, R., Lah, L., & Cuddy, E. "Definition of successful aging by elderly Canadian men: The Manitoba Follow-Up Study." *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2003.



■ Wisdom for all times

When he was almost 60, **Cicero**, the Roman philosopher and statesman (106-43 B.C.) captured his musings in an essay entitled “On Old Age.” Like many seniors today, Cicero did not regret his lost youthful vigour, but sought to make the most of the abilities he had. In his words: “Use whatever you have: that is the right way.” He delighted at the opportunity of his later years to devote more time to earlier interests and to take up new ones.

As policy-makers and service-providers plan for an aging society, they would do well to listen to seniors themselves in determining how to promote successful aging: “opportunities” and “choices” are the operative words.



“Bubs” Coleman, a 44-year resident of Saskatoon, was appointed to the National Advisory Council on Aging in 1999. She is also a member of the Provincial Advisory Committee of Older Persons. A graduate of Queen’s University, she has worked as a writer and editor in both this country and the United States, and until her retirement in 1994 was communications coordinator for Saskatoon’s Mendel Art Gallery. Her community volunteer activities currently include assisting the Saskatoon Council on Aging, working with Wanuskewin Heritage Park and serving on several civic groups focusing on seniors’ issues.

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