

VTech Guest Article

In Defense of Leisure: Discover the Joys of Activity

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There was a time when active aging meant fast rocking chairs, slow bingo games and lots of downtime on our hands. Forget about that. When the folks at the Lakeview Village in Lenexa, Kansas were asked to fundraise, five of them ages 80-95 jumped out of a plane from 14,000 feet for their charity.

The Lakeview 5 certainly had their **PERMA** on. PERMA is the collection of traits that make you happy as identified by Dr. Martin E.P. Seligman, the founder of positive psychologyⁱ. It stands for **P**leasure, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning and **A**ccomplishments. All of which can be fulfilled by leisure activities that bridges the gap between doing nothing, and doing too much.

There is a Spanish proverb that says: “How beautiful it is to do nothing, and then rest afterwards.” Age gives us the right to be happy by doing **less work**, or to be more accurate, by doing **more play**.

If you need proof that leisure is good for your health, look no further than a major UK [Longitudinal Study on Aging](#) which declared social detachment a “public health issue,” and found that subjects with a “greater enjoyment of life were more likely than other participants to be alive nine to ten years later.” Of participants in the highest third of enjoyment levels, over 90 percent were alive after 10 years. Of people in the lowest third of enjoyment, only 71.2 percent were alive.ⁱⁱ

And if we plan to play, we are best off playing with others. The [Longevity Project](#) conducted since 1921 followed 1,500 people from childhood and concluded that social relations are important to good health; and that involvement must be had with other people every day. Staying socially active in middle age is more important for healthy aging, than athleticism in your youth.ⁱⁱⁱ

You don't have to be in tip-top shape to participate in the fastest-growing outdoor activity in America; birding. The slogan of the [American Birding Association](#) is “Explore, Share, Contribute.” Older adults are the driving force in its growth. You can bird in your own backyard or make the experience a community event. Every February the [Great Backyard Bird Count](#) connects neighbors and strangers in a common effort to chronicle our birds.

Telephone lines sing with the stories of our observed feathered friends. Family outings are planned around the annual [Christmas Bird Count](#), which combines nature, camaraderie and accomplishment.

Fishing was (and still can be) the ultimate in isolated indolence. But today fishing, like birding, is also a line to new friends. [The Fishing Club Network](#) will hook you up with fishing clubs where you live.

Perhaps the ultimate in happy pursuits for us older adults is [gardening](#).^{iv} Count on spring to loosen your grip on negativity. Whether you are a one-pot wonder or designer of [community gardens](#), there is something for you in gardening. Stop and smell the roses with friends you make at events held by the [American Horticultural Society](#) or through [Horticultural Associations and Networks](#), and other [organizations](#).

Social psychologist Erik Erikson dubbed the ninth stage of life “Gerotranscendence,” a time when we look back over our lives to find meaning. A fulfilling leisure activity prompts us to do that, while also causing us to stay in the present. We cannot take our eye off that bird, that fishing line or that tender seedling; we must connect with them and with those who share our interests. But, part of sharing is telling stories of rare bird sightings from decades past, the fish that got away, the prize tulips from our childhood garden.

It is likely that our greatest moments of inspiration and wellness come during leisure, with its accompanying peace and contentment. This is something we should share with our children and grandchildren, who are often swept away by the pace of today’s frenetic world.

Even if they live far away, regular conversations can remind family members and friends of the value of creating memories through leisure. By sharing our stories, we can be beacons to illuminate the joys of health giving passive and active leisure. In defense of leisure, there is nothing sweeter than sharing the things you love to do with others.

Resources

Birding

American Birding Association, <http://aba.org>

Canopy Towers, www.CanopyTowers.com

Great Backyard Bird Count, <http://birds.audubon.org/great-backyard-bird-count>

Christmas Bird Count, <http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>

Sand Hill Cranes, <http://visitkearney.org/SANDHILL-CRANES>

World Birding Center, <http://www.theworldbirdingcenter.com>

Visiting McAllen, Texas, <http://www.mcallencvb.com/for-visitors/things-to-do-in-mcallen/nature-tourism/birding>

Fishing

Join with other fishermen, <http://www.fishingclub.com/>

North American Fishing Clubs, <http://www.takemefishing.org/fishing/overview>

Fishing Club Network, <http://www.fishingclubs.net/>

Gardening

American Horticultural Society, www.ahs.org

10 steps to start a community garden, <http://communitygarden.org>

Horticultural Associations and Networks, www.globalhort.org

Horticultural Organizations, <http://www.crescentbloom.com/ii/C/04.htm>

HortTechnology, <http://horttech.ashspublications.org/cgi/content/abstract/18/4/639>

Burpee, www.Burpee.com

Backyard Barter Gardens, <https://www.bigtent.com/groups/bgex>

ⁱ Martin E.P. Seligman: A Visionary New Understanding Of Happiness and Well-being(New York: Free Press, 2012)

ⁱⁱ www.ucl.ac.uk/news/pdf/elsa5final.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Howard S. Friedman, Leslie R. Martin, and The Longevity Project: Surprising Discoveries for Health and Long from the Landmark Eight - decade capitalize that study (New York: Hudson Street Press 2011.

^{iv}Gardening is also a great way to meet your exercise goals. A study by researchers at Kansas City University revealed that gardening meets the daily moderately intense exercise recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. Sin-Ae Park, Candice Shoemaker, and Mark Haub, Kansas State University.