

VTech Guest Article

From Well to Swell: The Seven Secrets of Successful Aging

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There is a rush of feeling that comes from being in love, experiencing something new or watching something inspiring. I believe we can achieve this “lighter than air” or “swell” feeling as we age, perhaps with greater ease than when we were younger. I’ve come up with seven secrets of successful aging intended to help us all get there. The seven secrets are gleaned from my research, interviews with leaders in the field of aging and from personal experience.

Secret 1: Trust

My first secret comes from a most credible source: my mother. She had a catch phrase that seemed to light everyone up: “My money is on you!” That one assurance was a declaration of trust and belief that generated a profound response. It is almost impossible to have a positive experience as you age if you have completely lost trust in your fellow man. And to the extent that your trust increases, wellness can follow.

Secret 2: Sleep

[Eddie Wiener](#), a futurist and consultant to international corporations, holds retreats to re-imagine health care, which she calls the “Swellness Movement.” I discovered my second secret attending her retreat on sleep. We were asked to imagine the perfect sleep, including where, on what, how long and when. Each person’s idea was different. Through the exercise, we learned that honoring the need to sleep is part of health; and that we often are ashamed of napping or even taking a long snooze.

One of the retreat experts, Susan Berks of the [Sleep Studio](#), told us that sleep is not just a time for resting and healing. It is a purposeful time that rejuvenates us mentally and physically. In [Blue Zones](#), a term for areas where citizens live longer lives, people take siestas during the day or naps that align with their own biologic clocks. Take your sleep regimen seriously and go to a sleep clinic if you are having trouble sleeping.

Secret 3: Stop and Smell the Roses

Scent is associated with the good and bad experiences of our lives. Science shows that [taste is hardwired](#) from the womb, but our [sense of smell](#) develops after we are born. Building on this knowledge, “stop and smell the roses” is the third secret.

Scent expert, Dr. Alan Hirsch of the [Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation](#), has conducted and published more than 200 research studies on the effects of smell and taste on human emotion, mood, behavior, diseases, consumer preferences and weight loss, among other topics. He has found that a fragrance can have a dramatic impact on the human body -- from curing migraines to losing weight.

You can love the smell of doughnuts and coffee or of a flower. But, the swellness effect will occur most strongly when the scent triggers a memory. My friend Wendy likes the smell of skunk because her mother liked it. She associates that odor with her mother’s

laughter. You can surround yourself with smells of the pleasant moments of your past, with aromatherapy candles or simply cinnamon in an open bowl.

Secret 4: Play

In Rochester, New York you will find the [National Museum of Play](#) and uncover the fourth secret. When we are young, we play to learn. When we are about to retire, we worry about filling our time with something meaningful, leaving a legacy and making sense of our lives. It wouldn't hurt to lighten up. The more naturally play can come to you, the more swell you will feel. A few benefits of [playing as we age](#) are:

- Stimulation of imagination increasing neuron strength
- Endorphins increasing feelings of wellbeing
- Enhanced creativity
- Connection and less isolation when we play with others
- A feeling of joy and contentment that helps us cope with negatives in our lives

Think of what happens to you when you see a child and start to make faces with him or her, or just exchange smiles. How light and joyful do you feel in that moment of play? Give yourself these moments often. In the same way, Maestro David Dworkin has created older adult play groups around music called [Conductorcise](#), where adults pretend to be conductors. Even those with Alzheimer's remember back and are carried by the music and movement. A sense of glee fills the room.

Drumming, dancing, puzzles and poetry may be your play, or even model airplanes. Like a muscle, practice playing a bit every day of your life. You will get better at it.

Secret 5: Stay Connected

Secret number five is to stay connected. [A British study](#) found that having 10 or more friends is associated with greater psychological well-being and measurably lower levels of chronic inflammation, a major cause of deterioration as we age.


Connectivity has an even better benefit, a feeling of belonging. When our children move away, and especially if we lose a spouse, we can fall into "isolating behaviors," even avoiding social contact. In my e-book [Just Keep Talking: 3 Simple Steps to Getting and Staying Connected at Any Age](#), you'll find resources and protocols to help prevent isolation and increase your feeling of belonging.

Secret 6: Self-Care

How about exercise, good nutrition and medication management? They all come under the sixth secret of self-care. Self-care is a type of sustainability of our own bodies and it is not just for the benefit of our own successful aging, but also for the well-being of others. If we are well, we are more productive, contribute more and potentially spend less on health care costs as we age. The good feelings resulting from being healthy and active can counteract depression, which can be the worst byproduct of aging.

Studies have found that 50 percent of all people battling depression are over 65 and [cost four times](#) the amount in health care than the national average for all people. Focusing on yourself and your health can prevent some of these long-term struggles.

Secret 7: Embrace Aging



And now for the seventh secret, embrace aging. Do not simply accept it, do not surrender to it, but embrace it. Admittedly, that is quite a challenge given the ageism that surrounds us, but let's look at it in a different way. We are the most ageist when we shun or deny our aging.

Start with a proud willingness to tell your age. If you don't think it's great to be 60, 70, 80, 100, who else will? Next, be willing to meet and socialize with young people. Make yourself part of any community in which you live. Don't exclude yourself from anything because of your age. By the same token, don't avoid older people. Many of us reject senior centers because we think we are "younger" in our thinking than others our age.

Understand that you are beautiful. [The Dove® Campaign for Real Beauty](#) has changed the way we look at each other; but the work is not complete. You are not invisible, take good care of your health and bodies.

Last, but not least, make your mark. Live with purpose and charity. Volunteer, work, write and take pictures. In my e-book, [Just Keep Talking: 3 Simple Steps to Getting and Staying Connected at Any Age](#), you will find numerous websites and ideas for giving back, life-long education, volunteer travel and more. Take advantage of all that's out there and be a beacon for successful aging.

If you want to feel swell, count the blessings of aging instead of sheep. As we can see in the seven secrets, there's a lot of good around us: gardens of roses, friends and fun. Enjoy it!