

VTech Guest Article

Walk, Dine, Laugh and Love - Wellness as We Age

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Some scientists predict a lifespan of 150 years will be attainable by mid-century.ⁱ But, while we all want “long age,” we do not want the deterioration of “old-age.” The new measure of successful aging is not length of years, but how many “good” years we will live. We want to be more than just disease-free; we want what futurist Edith Weinerⁱⁱ calls “Swellness,” a sense of well-being, healthfulness and mastery over our environment.

Highly credible studies show that a few simple habits can help us achieve this goal. Genetics account for less than 30 percent of our potential lifespan, and even less than that for healthy later years. What’s more, our genetic makeup becomes even less important every year that passes. What matters is nutrition, exercise, low-stress living, connection with friends and family and a life purpose.ⁱⁱⁱ

While we have come to understand the importance of nutrition and exercise, personal connections and communication are just as important. The MacArthur Foundation Study^{iv} found that a healthy attitude and acceptance of aging added as much as seven years to a person’s life! Similarly, the Okinawa Centenarian Study^v, lauds a lifestyle of fresh foods and community involvement.

Social ties sharpen the mind and strengthen the heart – literally. The Roseto Pennsylvania Study (1950)^{vi} investigated the unusually low amount of heart disease in a tight knit community with strong family and social ties. Over the years, as the population shifted and ties were broken, heart disease rates rose from well below the U.S. average to at or above average. As for stronger minds, a Harvard University study revealed that the odds of mental decline doubled for seniors with no social ties, as compared to those with robust relationships.^{vii}

Neurologists tell us that the brain is a “social organ;” we can add and strengthen neurons and synaptic connections by “interaction with other brains.”^{viii} In long-lived societies, older adults are considered an irreplaceable part of society. These life-engaged elders remain mentally sharp.

Social engagement influences physical factors as well, like cardiovascular function and blood pressure, and lowers the presence of coronary disease. Individuals with a rich social network lived at least 1.6 years longer than their peers.^{ix} Doctors report that patients with a busy schedule do better in heart operations than those with an empty calendar.

The granddaddy of all longevity studies, the Harvard Study of Adult Development,^x goes a step further with regard to what keeps us well as we age. The study started in the 1930s and followed hundreds of people throughout their entire lives.

Those who lived the longest and healthiest were caring, playful, curious, forgiving and able to re-frame their difficult experiences into positive lessons. No wonder the Mayo Clinic^{xi} cites optimism as a marker of healthy aging. In a study of 2,200 Mexican Americans^{xii} the optimistic subjects actually looked younger and had half the death and disability rate of their pessimistic cohorts.

Is it good science to say that having friends, talking to grandkids, laughing and volunteering can prevent heart disease or forestall fragility? It seems so. Happier people take their medicine, engage in self-care, and spring to life when they hear a welcome voice. So, be happy, eat well, exercise, keep friends, be optimistic and you will live longer.

Notes

ⁱAubrey de Grey, A Roadmap to End Aging, TED 2005

ⁱⁱ*Edith (Edie) Weiner* is President of *Weiner*, Edrich, Brown, Inc., a consulting company formed in 1977.

ⁱⁱⁱBiomarkers: The 10 Keys to Prolonging Vitality, Dr. Irwin Rosenberg, Dr. William Evans, Fireside 1992

^{iv}The MacArthur Foundation, Successful Aging, John Wallis Rowe, Robert L. Kahn, Dell, 1998

^vThe Okinawa Program, Bradley Wilcox, D. Craig Wilcox, Malato Suzuki, Three River Press, 2001

^{vi}The Roseto Effect: a 50-year comparison of mortality rates, B. Egolf, J. Lasker, L. Potvin, S. Wolf, American Journal of Public Health, August 1992; 82(8): 1089–1092. PMID: PMC1695733

^{vii}Harvard Mental Health Letter, *American Journal of Public Health*, July 2008, findings by Thomas Glass, August 1999, British Medical Journal

^{viii}The Neuroscience of Attachment, Linda Graham, Clinical Conversation at the Community Institute for Psychotherapy, 2008

^{ix}Findings by Swedish researchers, British Medical Journal, August 2012; Social and Productive Activities as Predictors Of Survival Among Elderly Americans, Thomas Glass, Carlos Mendes de Leon, Richard Marotti, Lisa Berkman, Harvard University, Rush Institute, Yale University, 1999

^xAging Well: Surprising Guideposts for a Happier Life, George E. Vaillant, Wiley, 2011, based on the Harvard Study of Adult Development, George E. Vaillant, M.D., Xing-jia Cui, M.D., Stephen Soldz, Ph.D.

^{xi}Mayo Clinic Study, Dr. Toshihiko Maruta, 2000

^{xii}G.V. Ostir, K.S., Markides, Black, S.A., & Goodwin, J.S., Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, 48, 473–478, 2000