

What does it mean to age successfully?

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by Eileen Beal

In their book, *Successful Aging* (from which I've unabashedly cribbed the title for this monthly column), John Rowe and Robert Kahn outlined what many see as the answer to the age-old question: What do we need to do to age well?

Ten years of research led Rowe and Kahn to the conclusion that to age successfully we must get the best medical care possible, stay physically and mentally active, and stay engaged with life: through life-long learning, continued interactions with family and friends, volunteer work, etc.

Other researchers, including Stephen Post, Ph. D., a professor of bioethics and the associate director of educational programs at CWRU's Medical School's Department of Bioethics, say there's a fourth component to aging successfully: spiritual well-being. And unless it's part of the successful aging equation, you may age healthily but you won't age happily.

Spiritual well-being often grows out of or along with religious spirituality, but it isn't a strictly religious concept: "It's a principle," said Dr. Post. "In the giving of self lies the discovery of self."

That kind of self-discovery is affirming and nurturing of self and others and by its very nature, altruistic, said Dr. Post.

And it helps us come to terms with the losses—loss of job-related income and status, loss of friends or spouse, changes in physical and mental function, etc.—that come with aging because, explained Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner, "it helps us find satisfaction and contentment and meaning, especially meaning, in how we have lived our life." Rev. Bagley-Bonner is a chaplain with Concordia Care, an east side adult day health center providing medical and social services that allow frail elders to remain in their home.

Citing *Aging Well*, a recently published book based on a Harvard Medical School study, Dr. Post also noted that cultivating spiritual well-being leads to a longer life. Participants in the study, who represented every ethnic and socioeconomic group, were tracked for 50 years, he explained, and those who were more nurturing and more giving "had the kind of enhanced mental and physical health that promotes longevity in older adults."

While spiritual well-being is not a religious principle, *per se*, it's often religious organizations that

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open the door on this facet of the successful aging process. "That's because we [clergy] are usually the first to respond to the needs of older adults," said Rev. Bagley-Bonner.

It's also because churches, synagogues, and mosques provide ready-made venues, such as activities, study groups, fellowship groups, etc., with like-minded people that foster the intellectual and emotional refocusing that brings about spiritual well-being. But, added Rev. Bagley-Bonner, other organizations, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or support groups for those dealing with life-altering illnesses, also open the "door" to spiritual well-being.

Refocusing encourages new ways of understanding, and often leads to participation in formal or informal life review. The later, explained Rev. Bagley-Bonner, allows people to examine how they have lived their lives and see patterns and themes; deal with guilt, fear, and anger; reconcile relationships with family members and friends; and reach a level of forgiveness of self and others that allows them to view the future realistically and positively.

From there, connections through participation in "neighborhood" activities (whether that neighborhood is a skilled nursing facility or a beachside retirement community), volunteering, or public service are built out into the wider community.

It is in the "wider community," noted both Rev. Bagley-Bonner and Dr. Post, where the spiritual aspect of aging comes into full flower. There, not only do elders, including those who are frail or chronically ill, reaffirm self by giving of self, they also become role models for their children and grandchildren.

They are very necessary role models, said Dr. Post. "The very status of the elderly in society," he said, "is dependent on the extent to which the younger generation views the older generation as being nurturing, caring, and helpful."

Books

The following books on spirituality and spiritual well-being may offer more information:

[Aging With Grace](#), David Snowden

[Aging Well](#), George E. Vaillant

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Altruism in Later Life, Elizabeth Midiarsky and Eva Kahana

Reflections on Aging and Spiritual Growth, Andrew J. Weaver, ed.

Tuesdays With Morrie, Mitch Albom

When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough, Harold S. Kushner

Unlimited Love: Altruism, Compassion, Service, Stephen Post, Ph.D.