

Aging Successfully: It's all about attitude

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By Eileen Beal

If you think you can or can't, you're right. Henry Ford

When it comes to aging successfully, more and more studies—including one done at Ohio University in Athens that tracked 660 older adults from 1975 to 2002—are showing that those who do it best do it with “attitude.”

The kind of attitude the studies focus on, however, isn't in-your-face hipness or cantankerousness (though a University of California/San Francisco study did show that the latter seemed “to be a protective characteristic among the elderly”), it's a positive, optimistic outlook. That kind of “attitude” doesn't just shape expectations and responses to situations, explains David M. Bass, Ph.D., director of the Margaret Blenkner Research Institute of the social service agency Benjamin Rose, “it promotes self-esteem, confidence and a willingness to adapt to new situations.”

Who has attitude?

People with “attitude” usually see themselves as being financially secure (i.e. having an income that covers their needs) rather than affluent, and they also tend to have fewer physical ailments as they age. However, being in good fiscal-physical shape is not the key component of “attitude.” That honor belongs to good emotional-mental health. “People who have that [emotional health] tend to look at life's glass as being half-full, not half-empty,” says Patricia Mahon, LISW, a geriatric social worker at MetroHealth Medical Center.

“Attitude,” adds Bass, is a powerful social magnet. “It keeps others in the picture,” he explains, “because they like to interact with people who have good attitudes.”

While most people with “attitude” are born with a predisposition to it, there is still much one can do to boost an already existing “attitude” quotient and/or incorporate “attitude” into their life. But, stressed everyone interviewed for this month's column, growing “attitude” takes work. And it's often emotionally uncomfortable work because, says Lehman, “you're stretching your comfort boundaries and doing things you haven't done before.”

Cultivating attitude

To make things easier, start with the easy stuff, go slow, and build on small successes.

Eat better. Every time you eat a well-balanced meal—one that's vitamin, mineral and nutrient-dense, fiber-rich and low in calories—you fuel your body and mind for successful aging. “A lot of older adults think it's too late to change [eating habits] at their age, but it's never too late,” says Christine Price, Ph.D., a gerontologist at Ohio State University.

Become a lifelong learner. Anything that stimulates the mind—working puzzles, volunteering, gardening, travel, a new job, reading, Tai Chi exercise classes—qualifies as learning, says Price. “What's important,” she adds, “is that [what you are doing] provides a sense of purpose and feelings of competency and productivity.”

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Up your humor quotient. Research indicates that people with a well-developed sense of humor (often referred to as a positive attitude) have better emotional and physical health. Studies indicate that a good sense of humor doesn't just put a smile on your face, it gets the feel-good hormones circulating in your brain and helps keep the immune system strong so you are better able to handle stress and manage chronic conditions.

Increase your social support network. That means building and/or strengthening connections with family members, friends, 'pseudo kin' (those you view as family). "You have to be the one to put forth the effort...to make the connections [and] to get engaged," says Mark Lehman, LISW, manager of the social work department at MetroHealth Medical Center. "If you don't, people won't reach out to you."

"This is especially important for married men who've lost their wives," he adds. "They've never had to do it because they were riding on the coat-tails of their wives to create their social network."

Tap into your spirituality. Studies show that those who have some type of spiritual belief system—whether it's individual or faith-based—tend to be healthier, happier, and more emotionally resilient in late life.

For more information, read:

Aging Well, George E. Vaillant

Aging With Grace, David Snowden

Looking Forward: An Optimists Guide to Retirement, Ellen Freudenheim

My Time: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life, Abigail Trafford

Successful Aging, John Rowe, Robert Kahn

The Pursuit of Happiness, David G. Myers

Tuesdays With Morrie, Mitch Albom