

Making the Right Move: Housing Options for Seniors

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Chapter 1

AGING SUCCESSFULLY

The following story illustrates the effect of a positive mind on a positive life. By maintaining balance in all areas of her life, Mrs. Stein manages to exemplify successful aging. In fact, gerontologists ought to be studying people like her to examine how she was able to survive so well.

Case Study

Aging Successfully: Mrs. Stein's Story

The sun shone on Mrs. Stein, making her silver hair sparkle as she sat on a bench under a tree outside her apartment. Her son had arranged a party for her 90th birthday, and the garden was filled with chatting groups of people, from high school girls, young married couples, and middle-aged matrons to dowagers and people her own age, all somehow connected to Mrs. Stein through her many varied activities.

Mrs. Stein was holding court, vivaciously telling stories. She introduced the man sitting next to her as her “latest squeeze,” telling the story of how they had met and fallen in

love. "He came to one of my lectures on Emily Brontë, and I went to one of his lectures about astronomy, and that was that." She had been divorced 35 years previously and had had no man in her life until now. She was an intellectual and a scholar on Emily Brontë and now she lectured at the senior's university alumni center.

Although Mrs. Stein had physical problems, she made light of them. She had arthritis in her knees, which made walking difficult. She had trouble seeing and needed very strong light and a strong magnifying glass to read. It was slow going, but she persisted and talked to her friends about what she had read. She even did needlepoint under the same circumstances, although the stitching was no longer as minuscule as it had been in her earlier work. Also, Mrs. Stein was getting deaf and had trouble hearing her classical music unless she turned it up quite high. By so doing, the deafness did not bother her. She could still hear people talking to her as long as background noise was minimal.

Mrs. Stein had always been active in the affairs of her cooperative housing project and was responsible for drawing up the bylaws that governed their living. Her apartment co-op was an early government project with rent geared to income, so this helped to keep her financially independent and enabled her to pursue her many interests.

Mrs. Stein was known to the continuing care division of her regional health board and had a homemaker once a month to clean her apartment. She cooked for herself, and a neighbor got her groceries because she had stopped driving a couple of years ago.

Her only son lived out of town but came to visit every couple of months. She phoned him occasionally to keep in touch. Her family included her vast number of friends in the apartment townhouse complex, and she was always meeting new people and making new friends. She had a vast knowledge about many subjects, was terribly opinionated, but had

a rare sense of humor and a delight in living that enchanted everyone.

She was interested and contributed to her community. She was responsible for establishing a group in a senior center that advocated for elder rights. Over the years, when she took an interest in anything, she devoted her great mind to seek solutions and solve problems. She was an activist, and some of her early efforts had flourished into growing organizations in which she was still involved in their daily affairs.



Making the Choice to Age Successfully

Aging is a beautiful, normal process. Aging successfully means living a long and healthy life. It is a personal task steeped in choices. How you act and how you think can to a large degree determine how well you age. By optimizing your strengths and compensating for your disabilities, you can overcome the challenges life throws at you.

Everyone has the capacity for change, no matter what age they may be. You are not in a process of inevitable decline, and you can be as active as you choose to be. Modern aging studies show that old ideas about aging are largely inaccurate. For example, it is not normal to be stiff and have trouble walking. Inactivity or illness causes this. Studies show that two-thirds of the signs usually attributed to aging are the result of disuse or disease, while only one-third is actually due to aging itself. In fact, normal aging does not result in slower, less efficient physical, mental, or spiritual activity.

Our motivations and actions are largely influenced by three factors: the body, mind, and spirit. The balance between these three can be delicate. Like Mrs. Stein, you may be vulnerable to physical, psychological, economic, social, and environmental challenges. For example, the pain and

discomfort of disease may result in depression. Retiring from work may leave you with very little disposable income. Physical inactivity may prevent you from pursuing a social life, making you dependent on people coming to see you. This can lead to isolation and loneliness. You may be at risk of falling because of environmental hazards and adverse drug combinations. By consciously trying to balance your body, mind, and spirit, you can to a large degree reduce the effect of these challenges.

Dealing with the Physical Effects of Aging

Elders of today are surviving longer and living better than in the past. On the whole, they are a healthier group than they were a decade ago. In fact, as your children age, they will probably be healthier than you are. One of the major reasons that elders are living better is because less disability is caused by illness than in the past, and drugs control many symptoms.

Modern medicine has made great advances in curing acute illnesses. The discovery of antibiotics was a milestone in the cure of many acute illnesses such as ear infections, gall bladder infections, measles, mumps, rubella, and whooping cough. Advances in surgical techniques for replacement and removal of diseased body parts have contributed to fewer people dying from acute disease.

However, we are currently only managing, not curing, chronic illnesses such as arthritis (inflammation of the joints), osteoporosis (porous or holey bones that break easily), and macular deterioration (nerve-ending damage to the eye that leads to blindness). We can treat the symptoms, but not eliminate the cause.

Depending on the cause of your illness, medical, alternative, or nonmedical interventions may help increase your physical capacity. You may suffer from a chronic illness that affects your body, but in the process of coping, you may gain a new emotional sense of well-being in your mind.

Your body structure will change throughout your life. The changes start from the moment you are born. Take the skin, for example. A baby's skin is soft and flexible. The skin cells slough off as growth occurs until, in old age, the skin loses some of its elasticity and ability to be soft and flexible, which results in wrinkles and lines. The skin changes at different rates. Some 80-year-olds look no older than 60, and some 60-year-olds look older because of their wrinkled skin.

Your muscles also change as you develop from babyhood. However, if you continue to use your muscles, you will find that your physical capacity can be amazing. You may not have to change the way you live your life, as your body changes gradually and enables you to accommodate. So when you see elders doing physical activities such as hiking and skiing, you'll notice that they have more efficiency of movement and don't "hot rod" it up or down the hill as they did in their youth.

Physical well-being is a major part of happiness and life satisfaction. It provides you with the means to do what you want to do, when you want to do it, and it helps you achieve purpose in your life.

How to enhance your physical well-being

You may choose to enhance your physical body development through exercise. Consider some of the following tips for further taking care of your body:

- * *Be aware of and strive for balance in your life between exercise, nutrition, and rest and relaxation.* Be cautious of the drugs you take, including nonprescription over-the-counter drugs, such as vitamins, allergy pills, herbal medicines, or laxatives. Know what medications you are taking and why. Medication can save your life, but too many drugs may react adversely and make you sick. Ask your physician or pharmacist about your medication.

- * *Be energetic.* Don't slow down. Universal law dictates that natural order is ordained by only one mechanism: a well-directed, positive flow of energy. Endeavor to maintain your energy flow. You do not need to be slower as you get older.
- * *Be in the habit of eating what nature first laid on your table.* Eat a generous portion of fruits, vegetables, and lean meat. Your meals may be smaller and more often than in previous decades, but you still need good food to retain your energy. Indulge yourself by eating and drinking sensibly. Make the effort and take the time to prepare nourishing meals.
- * *Be open to new learning.* Achieving a healthy body requires development and application of skills in such areas as self-awareness and lifestyle management.
- * *Be persistent.* If the physician you consult dismisses your symptoms as a consequence of your age, seek a second opinion.
- * *Be physically active.* Do at least 30 minutes of sustained rhythmic vigorous exercises four times a week. Seek out patterns, times, places, and contacts that make exercise as much a part of your life as eating and sleeping are. This may mean walking to a shopping area or joining the walking group in the mall.
- * *Be rested.* Get as much sleep and rest as you need. Make quiet times a priority. Your sleep pattern may change as you age. If you nap during the day, you may not sleep as long at night. But you need the overall hours of accumulated sleep.
- * *Be sensitive to changes in your body and abrupt changes in your ability to function.* For example, if you notice changes such as difficulty in dressing or a loss of appetite, you should see a physician and get a thorough diagnostic exam.

Dealing with the Mental Effects of Aging

Although society is preoccupied with the effects of aging on bodies, gerontologists are discovering that a healthy mind and spirit are most important to successful aging. According to US statistics, 80 percent of elders in nursing homes have a significant mental health problem, with depression as the most common condition.

Your mind is your intellect and gives you the ability to learn, grow, and handle challenges. It provides you with the means to develop a purpose in life and to be happy. Having a healthy mind means you have the ability to establish and maintain intimacy with others and to tolerate and appreciate differences.

How to enhance your mental well-being

- * *Be a risk-taker.* Life does not get better until you are willing to challenge yourself and do things that may be difficult. Accept the challenge. Take a trip.
- * *Be a student.* Learn something new, such as computer skills. Your brain is as good as it ever was. Use it and rejoice in the knowledge that the ability to learn never dies. You live in an information age where there is ready access to infinitely new subjects.
- * *Be an opportunist.* See difficulties as challenges that give you the opportunity to overcome them and experience success. Attend a lecture at the wellness center.
- * *Be aware of the Golden Rule:* Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
- * *Be confrontational.* Be willing to confront people with issues that are important to you. Take responsibility for your part in the issue. Stand up for what you believe, and have your questions answered so you understand. Find a mutually satisfying solution.

- * *Be open in your communication with others.* Tell people how you feel, and own your own feelings without blaming those feelings for your reactions. Listen to your grandchildren; within youth are many truths.
- * *Be open-minded.* Be willing to hear another person's point of view without judgment. It doesn't have to agree with your own. Be willing to consider other possible facts, solutions to problems, and explanations.
- * *Expand the perimeters of your awareness.* Accept that your children lead their own lives, and take an interest in what they are thinking. It's a fast-changing world.
- * *Be positive about yourself.* Surround yourself with family and friends who validate you. You need encouragement and positive feedback as well as honest concern.
- * *Be responsible for your life.* Your actions create consequences. Find solutions without blaming others. Maybe you are lonely. Have a conversation with the person who delivers your mail. See people every day and talk to them. Join a temple or a church.

Dealing with the Spiritual Effects of Aging

The basic concepts of spiritual health emphasize love, joy, peace, sense of purpose, and achieving your full potential. Having spiritual health does not necessarily mean you are religious. You may be spiritual but not identify with any religious group. Religion is a support resource for many elders because it provides hope and meaning to many.

Values formed over time are an extension of your attitude to life. Spiritual health is a process that reflects the intangible aspects of your quality of life. It involves taking a personal inner journey that is different for every person. Discovering or creating life meaning can raise you above pain and loss. In the pursuit of successful aging, spirituality is relevant and compelling.

How to enhance your spiritual well-being

- * *Be a finisher.* Nature operates in such a way that growing and living are nearly synonymous. When one stops, so does the other. Complete that book or tapestry you have been working on for so long.
- * *Be a goal-setter.* Set goals and accept challenges that force you to be active.
- * *Be creative.* Creativity is not confined to the first part of your life. In fact, accumulated knowledge and experience make the later decades more congenial to new accomplishments. Join an art group or a wood-working or calligraphy class.
- * *Be happy.* Maintain your sense of humor. Make each day an opportunity for optimism for yourself and others. A positive mind creates expectations that something good is about to happen and opens doors to new options for success. Learn a new joke every day.
- * *Be independent.* Don't depend on others for your well-being. A well-developed sense of who you are is the crucial link to a long and meaningful existence. We all need to maintain dignity, autonomy, and independence in our daily lives. Find a place to live where you have access to shopping, the library, your place of worship, and other necessary amenities.
- * *Be kind to yourself.* Make time in your day to meditate, pray, or have quiet moments.
- * *Be motivated, and see challenges as opportunities for change.* Difficulties in your life can be overcome if you regard them as opportunities. Do something to change your situation or emotional mindset. Join the senior's activity center near you.
- * *Be necessary and responsible.* Live outside yourself. Volunteer your services. See each day as a chance to help someone or something. Associate with other

active, involved individuals. Sharpen your sense of duty to preserve your environment, the earth that nurtures everyone. Do some gardening today.

- * *Be positive.* Be willing to see different sides to a situation, and pursue a course of action and thinking that allows for positive changes, or acceptance of what is. Invite that old friend over for tea and mend the rift between you.

It is essential that you maintain balance in your life. Be aware that to be healthy, you need to pay attention to all parts of yourself. Successful aging means your body, mind, and spirit are used to capacity.