

# *I'm Positive, I'm Aging*

University of Illinois Extension



From the time you are born, you start to age. Everyone on this earth is aging. The word “aging” is associated with positive words like “wisdom”, “timeless”, and “experienced.” But it also generates as many or more negative words and visuals. Why is there such a negative perception of aging or getting older? According to a study in 2015 by the FrameWorks Institute regarding public misconceptions about aging, the majority of the participants equated aging with decline, loss, slowing and breaking down. Negativity for aging is heightened even more due to the media’s portrayal of the process and those that are older.

But aging experts point out that older adults are living long, healthier lives than those before them. Older adults:

- Are more educated—84.4% completed a high school or higher degree
- Have higher incomes than in the past
- Own their own homes—77.9%
- Have kept up with technology—85% of Boomers and 62% of Silent have internet
- Are married—69.5%

Many older adults experience what is called ageism, which according to Dr. Robert Butler, is a “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old.” What’s interesting is that ageism can affect anyone—and younger adults can also experience ageism because they are treated differently due to their youth. But according to a study in 2016, there were many similarities found between all the adult generations. 95% of the participants believed they were still actively learning, and they reported that they laughed several times a day, got complimented often, exercised at least once a week or more, and they agreed that getting older was about staying vital, not about staying young!

So what can we all do to age successfully or positively? What are the attributes of those that seem to have aged well? Studies show six main characteristics in relation to positive aging.

## **1) Maintain a positive or optimistic attitude.**

Extensive research has shown that optimism improves well-being and physical health and that resilience and optimism are also associated with greater longevity. It is thought that positive people’s

thinking is more creative, integrative, flexible and open. Feeling positive emotions can lead to the discovery of novel ideas, actions and social bonds and can buffer people against depression.

Ways to fine-tune your optimism include:

- Be around positive people and those that support you
- Laugh and surround yourself with things that help relieve stress
- Practice positive self-talk and turn negative statements/thoughts into positive ones
- Try not to worry about the things you have no control over
- Develop a gratitude list

## **2) Be social**

Staying socially active can reduce stress, blood pressure, risk of developing depression, and the progression of declining health. It can improve cognitive function and physical fitness. It can also give meaning and order to our lives, help us maintain interest in others and improves resiliency.

Ways to stay socially connected include:

- Get involved in a cause or interest that is meaningful to you
- Pursue a passion
- Do something that you enjoy each day—have fun
- Engage in a community of support (community or civic group, church, etc.)
- Reach out to those who cannot get out much



## **3) Have purpose**

People who live life with purpose look beyond themselves and find true joy in giving to others. The power of purpose enhances a person's physical and psychological health, and promotes resilience, creativity and productivity. Purpose is uplifting and motivating and contributes to better overall health. It goes beyond just making a person happy, but also brings them a true sense of fulfillment. Volunteering is a great way to build purpose into your social relationships.

Ways to volunteer and get more involved in your community include:

- Reflect on your job or former job for ideas about what you might offer to others
- Think of a skill you can teach. Can you teach youth this skill? Can you make items to donate for those in need?
- Maybe you could work as a mentor or a tutor and volunteer at a school, hospital or preschool program
- If you appreciate nature and conservation, you could work at a nature preserve or park

- Prepare or deliver meals for shut-ins or at a food bank
- Contact local civic or volunteer organizations to learn of service opportunities

#### 4) Eat well

Eating healthy and maintaining a healthy weight also affects the aging process in a positive way. Use the My Plate method and following the recommendations made at [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov).

A heart healthy diet includes:

- Lean meat, poultry, fish, nuts—limit red meat
- Whole grains
- Veggies and fruits should take up half your plate
- Low-fat dairy
- Limit sugar and sodium
- Alcohol in moderation
- Plenty of water



#### 5) Be Active

Staying physically active is important and experts recommend a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise each week. Not only is physical activity good for your body but studies have shown that regular aerobic activity contributed to faster reaction times, better concentration and increased ability to focus and ignore distractions. It has also been shown to create significant increases in brain volume in older adults.

To become physically active:

- Start out slow, and build your way up to three days a week, and beyond
- Activities can be broken up into smaller amounts of time throughout the day
- It doesn't have to be traditional exercise—gardening, yardwork, cleaning house, anything that gets you moving is acceptable
- Do something you enjoy—you'll stay with it longer
- Recruit an exercise buddy

#### 6) Challenge yourself intellectually

Challenging your brain with new, interesting and increasingly difficult tasks helps it stay healthy and helps maintain memory and cognitive function.

To challenge yourself:

- Take up a new hobby
- Learn a new language, game or skill

- Play games with friends
- Engage in tricky word or number puzzles
- Attend a local Wits Fitness brain exercise class

There are many people that did not achieve their most notable accomplishments until later in life—and those that continue, do amazing things at ages that can be inspirational to us all. Here are just a few:

Nelson Mandela - won Nobel Peace Prize at age 76

Ray Kroc - founder of McDonalds at age 52

Ernestine Shepherd - oldest female bodybuilder at age 73—began lifting weights at age 56

Betty Reid Soskin - oldest park service ranger at age 98—began her career at age 85

Benjamin Franklin - signed the Declaration of Independence at age 70

Sister Madonna Buder - triathlon athlete at age 90



Hopefully this lesson serves as an inspiration to aging adults (which is all of us)! Frank Lloyd Wright once said “The longer I live, the more beautiful life becomes.” If we can see past the negative stereotypes and change our view of aging to one of looking forward to our later years rather than dreading them, we can lead more productive lives. The positive aspects of aging that are outlined in this handout provide a sort of blueprint for “successful” aging.

### **Additional Suggested Reading and Resources:**

Jenkins, J. (2016) “Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age.” PublicAffairs.

Cohen, G.D. (2000) “The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life.” New York: HarperCollins Publishers

<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu>

[www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/seven-tips-for-successful-long-term-aging/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/seven-tips-for-successful-long-term-aging/)

[www.lifelivedforward.com](http://www.lifelivedforward.com)

[www.nationalservice.gov/serve/search](http://www.nationalservice.gov/serve/search)

**Authors: Susan Sloop and Cheri Burcham, Family Life Educators, University of Illinois Extension**

**Updated 2020**

University of Illinois U.S. Department of Agriculture Local Extension Councils Cooperating

University of Illinois Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

If you need a reasonable accommodation to participate in this program, please contact your local Extension office.

**I ILLINOIS**  
Extension