

How to Age Well and Live a Happy Life

by *Elaine Voci* Ph.D.

There are many paths to successful aging and there has yet to be found one “right” way to grow old. But people who age well—who demonstrate “positive aging”—set an example of loving life and being grateful for everything they have. They are less depressed than their same age counterparts and the general population. In times of loss, sorrow and setbacks they remain convinced that life is worthwhile. They don’t shrink from acknowledging that life can be difficult, but they never lose their love of life.

These individuals are worth studying because we can learn a lot from them and there are practical and beneficial outcomes from the positive choices they make:

- 1 Having an attitude of gratitude makes it easier to graciously accommodate to changes in life and since change is ongoing, this is an important life skill.
- 2 A positive outlook tends to attract like-minded people who become part of a loving support system that can help during a health crisis, a loss experience, or other significant transitions.
- 3 Being positive in the face of life’s challenges brings compassion for self and others that allows conflicts to be resolved through forgiveness and quantum leaps to be made in relationships.
- 4 Continued personal growth buffers the impact of aging with its inevitable losses as friends and family members pass away and reduces the potential to be overwhelmed by grief.

Positive Aging and Adult Development

In order to develop fully into mature, capable and happily fulfilled adults there are six key tasks that must be mastered. Achievement of these tasks is often imperfect and there is always room for growth. The tasks tend to overlap; no one stage is more important than the others. Each task is completed within social relationships because personal growth requires other people. We can think of adult development as a map that contributes to our wholeness as we progress from youth to old age:

- 1 Identity—Adolescents must develop a sense of self that enables them to successfully separate from their parents and to create a place for themselves in the world. They must find their own tastes in music, political views, values and passions.
- 2 Intimacy—Young adults must create close reciprocal emotional bonds with a mate or a partner in a relationship based on interdependence, and mutual



commitment, whether it is “mating for life” or having a “marriage type love” for one another.

- 3 Career Consolidation—Adults must assume a social identity in a career that not only helps society but brings them pleasure as much as play once did when they were children, thereby resulting in contentment, competence and compensation.
- 4 Generativity—Older adults must possess a clear capacity to unselfishly guide the next generation—to give themselves to something greater than themselves in caring relationships with those who are younger, yet also continuing to respect their autonomy.
- 5 Keeper of the Meaning—The elderly must pass on the traditions of the world’s cultures and institutions with a concern that extends beyond the immediate community to future generations. In a real sense, the elderly person is a bridge from the past to the future.
- 6 Integrity—The last of the six tasks for the elderly is to achieve a peaceful heart and along with it, wisdom, order and spirituality characterized by a detached concern, even in the face of death and the decline of the body and mental functions. As one elderly friend recently observed, “I am ready to meet my maker; while it would be nice to see my grandchildren grow up, I have lived a full life and accomplished most of what I wanted to achieve and what was expected of me. I am at peace.”

The Harvard Medical School Longitudinal Study

Harvard Medical School has spent more than 50 years studying Adult Development, looking at life choices, health and happiness in hundreds of Harvard graduates who were followed from their late teens into their old age. The landmark study revealed surprising insights about how we can all lead more fulfilling, meaningful and healthier lives as we age. Among the most significant findings to emerge:

- **It is not the bad things that happen to us that doom us;** it is the good people who happen to us at *any* age that facilitate an enjoyable old age. Happiness is contagious and the more we are surrounded by upbeat people, the happier we feel.
- **The past often predicts, but never determines, old age.** We are never too old to change a behavior, forgive a wrong done, or improve a limiting attitude. We can grow, learn and satisfy our curiosity about the world throughout life.
- **Healing relationships** are possible when capacities for gratitude, forgiveness and for loving someone deeply are present. While revenge, anger and fear are corrosive emotions that harm our bodies and our spirit, gratitude and love bring healing and hope.
- **A good marriage at age 50 predicted positive aging at 80.** But surprisingly, low cholesterol levels at age 50 did not. Love is good for those who are “young at heart” no matter how old they are.
- **Joy makes for successful aging.** The heart speaks with more vitality than the head. It is joy that facilitates learning to adapt to change and accepting the philosophy that “what can’t be beaten can be endured with a smile on your face.”
- **Alcohol abuse consistently predicted unsuccessful aging.** Apart from its devastating impact on health, alcoholism also damages future social supports that are vital in later years.
- **Learning to play and to create** after retirement, and learning to gain younger friends as we lose older ones, add more to enjoying life than retirement income.



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Elaine's life coaching practice is located in Carmel, IN and offers individual, couples and group coaching around the topics of gratitude, forgiveness, as well as career coaching. Coaching can also be provided over the phone if distance is an issue.

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Gratitude and Aging Well

Those who age well teach us to live each day as a ‘thank you’. Appreciation is akin to praying: when the elderly speak appreciation out loud, they help us consciously focus on the good in all our lives. When they describe challenges they have overcome that have made them stronger, we each draw closer to knowing what our Best Selves look like. And through their courage, perseverance and faith, we learn how to participate in the great river of life, adding momentum to humanity’s progress.

Aging well and gratitude are intertwined, so if you aspire to age positively you can begin by adopting two simple, but powerful, daily rituals to help strengthen and inspire your soul:

- Start each day with thoughts of appreciation and positive expectations.
- End each day with a gentle review of the blessings given, lessons learned and appreciation for those you met along the way.

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Aging Well, Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life, Little Brown and Company, George Vallant, M.D. 2002.