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## **An Exploration of Healthy Aging: Tips for Living Well in Later Years**

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Myths and stereotypes plague our society's view of all age groups. This phenomenon is called ageism. It is the false view of seniors as less than productive members of society living in poor health, dependent upon others, and suffering from physical and cognitive decline. It includes attitudes towards seniors that their knowledge and skills are out-dated.

Research has shown that these stereotypes couldn't be farther from the truth. In fact, the majority of older adults live independently in the community, contribute to the work force as volunteers or employees (full or part-time), and maintain active lifestyles. There are many factors that contribute to "successful" aging: a few key factors are discussed here.

### 1. *Maintaining Good Nutrition*

The body does change with aging and older adults do face new challenges. Muscle volume decreases and caloric needs change: metabolism slows down and people may feel less energy. Often, older adults do not feel as hungry and pay less attention to nutritional needs. This can increase their risk factors for disease. Conscious choices to maintain good nutrition play a large part in off-setting negative side effects while sustaining the positive health benefits of medications.

### 2. Positive Attitudes about Health

A second key point to maintain health is one's perspective on health, including positive coping attitudes. In a large life span study of aging conducted by Harvard (Valiant, 2002), successful older adults actually did not face fewer health problems, rather they tended to enrich other areas of their lives. They focused more on contributing and doing what they were able to do instead of focusing on health problems as major obstacles to enjoying life.

### 3. *Relationships and Social Support Networks*

Staying connected with family and/or social supports is , a key factor for prevention of isolation, depression, and poor health habits. Positive relationships keep a person engaged with living, improves life satisfaction, and provides meaningful experience.

#### 4. *Creating and Sustaining Meaning and Purpose*

Life changes that impact older adults include retirement, loss of loved ones, changes in living environments, and other events that make staying connected with others more difficult. For many, work before retirement was a primary focus of purposeful activity. Retired persons need to look for ways to be involved with new interests and reconnect with old interests. Creating a new routine of activity, community involvement, and social connections after retirement offers a continued sense of belonging and purpose in daily living. Search for simple things to appreciate and enjoy to refresh life's meaning.

#### 5. *Spirituality and Faith*

A spiritual life is not always about following an organized religion. Typically, a person's engagement in spirituality increases in later years. The key element of spirituality and religion is the hope that they offer and the connection to one's "human-ness." Religious institutions are places that can offer a coming together of people with united purpose and meaning as they embark on understanding themselves, others, and their human experience.

#### 6. *Personal Characteristics of Successful Older Adults*

- Persistence and Resiliency
- Humor
- Creativity
- Wisdom
- Warmth
- Generativity (Taking care of the next generation)

Older adults are a vital part of all parts of life: past, present, and future. As the "keepers of wisdom and meaning," their knowledge informs the current generation and those to follow since "those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it" (George Santayana, sociologist). Their influence and guidance to the next generation shapes the future. Their warmth and spirit enriches our collective "today." Older adult readers: Be aware that you still have something to offer! Optimize your today and you inspire everyone's tomorrow. For more information on aging issues please contact Eldercare Assessment & Resources at 484-895-3720.

#### References

*Aging Well* by George Valiant (2002)

*The Merck Manual of Healthy Aging* (2004)

*Man's Search for Meaning* by Victor Frankl (1965)