

Getting Old, Who Isn't?

To answer that question one would have to say only people who are dead! So, why is getting older such a shunned notion? Getting sick is not necessarily the same as getting old. Most people don't want to get sick and most people should want to get old. How can each person approach the aging process with positive attitudes and responsible behaviors? It takes a whole-person orientation, which considers six areas of wellness, physical, social, emotional, occupational, intellectual, and spiritual. There are older folks with chronic illnesses, little money, and limited family who delight with each day. There are retired executives living in penthouse apartments hopeless and addicted to alcohol. Who embraces graceful aging?

Most elders are not afraid of death but the dying process. It becomes our collective and individual responsibilities to age as healthy as possible. That means, prevention of diseases that can be controlled, obtain screening tests (Medicare pays for many), and take care of one's emotional health. Being proud of healthy aging debunks the myth of over-the-hill mentality. The view from the top of that hill looks in both directions, past and future!

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Community Counseling of Central Connecticut Inc.

GETTING OLD, WHO ISN'T?

BY
DR. TERRY RUBY



*We treat people not
privilege...
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Six Areas of Wellness

Physical: The need for exercise highlights every research study on this topic. Get started, every move counts and this ball is in your court! Also, diet, nutrition, use of tobacco, drugs, and excessive alcohol consumption affect physical wellness.

Social: research demonstrates friendship sustains elders more than family. Social abilities encourages contributing to the environment and the local community as well as emphasizing the interdependence between others and nature.

Emotional: This recognizes the awareness and acceptance of one's feelings. The ability to form relationships with others based on mutual commitment, trust, and respect is a critical aspect of emotional health. Depression is not part of normal aging!

Occupational: Whether one is retired, working, and/or volunteering personal satisfaction in life through work occupies a place in our culture. Individuals convey their values through involvement in activities that satisfy them. How about giving back with a "thank you" and a smile?

Intellectual: Learning something new each day applies to all ages. Only when true dementia is present can one no longer really learn. Intellectual stimulation and creativity go hand in hand. A well-rounded person expands their knowledge and skills while discovering the potential for sharing their gifts with others.

Spiritual: Believing in a God works for some but it is not necessary for spiritual wellness. The search for meaning and purpose in life leads to harmony between internal feelings and emotions and the personal values and aspirations of one's life.

Other Considerations as We Age

Health Care Proxies: Although appropriate for all adults, this document becomes more important as one ages. Choosing someone who can carry out your wishes if you cannot takes assertiveness. Too many times family members make their own decisions to "do everything" to keep their elder loved one alive despite the elder's wish to the contrary.

Independence vs. Interdependence: The myth of independence takes on steam with the elder population. When was anyone truly independent? Who grows all their own food and produces the cloth for their clothes? So, interdependence has always been the way and becomes more important with aging. Knowing when to ask for help allows elders to live in the community vs. an institution for a longer time.

Overmedicated or Not: This dilemma becomes one of degree and communication between the elder and the health care providers. Research demonstrates that more than 5-7 prescribed medications for one elder constitutes poly pharmacy leading to adverse effects.

Health Benefits of Humor: With aging come losses so how can one develop or sustain a sense of humor? Humor can lower blood pressure, connect elders to others, and it is contagious! Just try to belly laugh for no apparent reason; your face gets exercise, you massage your intestines, and your attitude makes an automatic shift. These rewards don't come in a prescription bottle; they are available to you free of charge all day and all night!

Fall Prevention: Once an elder falls their risk for another fall increases exponentially. How to prevent falls is a major focus of community programs for elders. Can you stand on one foot for 10 seconds? Can you reach forward with one arm 8 to 10 inches without moving your feet? Do you wear supportive footwear at all times? Any scatter rugs around your home? Look into fall prevention programs in your community. Remember, once a fall occurs a cascade of declining physical and emotional health follows.

Protecting Your Memory: learn a relaxation response; work to improve your social network; build optimism, give to others, as much as possible take control of your life and enjoy it; exercise; eat a nourishing diet. "The true art of memory is the art of attention" (Samuel Johnson). Not being able to find your keys is different from not knowing what to do with the keys!

Change How You Live Not Where You Live:

Surveying your home with an eye focused on safety may just extend your ability to stay home. Also, recognizing when in-home help, privately or community sponsored, will allow an elder to remain home longer makes financial and emotional sense. Many elders resist downsizing their living arrangements, which leads to a crisis when an adverse event occurs. Make choices out of strength! Move toward your goal, not away from a problem!

Caring for the Caregiver: Many elders are caregivers for their spouses, adult children, and other family members and friends. Without this elder caregiver the "patient" would be living in a nursing home. The elder caregiver has needs to consider, their own and those of the loved one. Knowing when to accept and/or ask for help relieves a tremendous burden. Realizing one's limits and expecting setbacks are important to understand; chronically ill elders are on a health roller coaster even when the care they are provided is stellar. Exercise, healthy diet, rest, and yes, a vacation are all ingredients for the health of the caregiver.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine:

Mind, body, and spirit work together. Mind - Ask yourself, "How do I feel?" Tune into your emotions; be mindful; notice your environment and your breathing; state your strengths and your mistakes. Hope does not cure, but when it affects biochemicals it does (The Anatomy of Hope by Jerome Groopman, M.D.). Body - consider vitamins and herbal medicine; chiropractic medicine has a place in elder care; music therapy, exercise, acupressure and acupuncture, meditation, hypnotherapy, relaxation, sleep, and massage therapy are suggestions to nourish the body. Spirit - prayer, aromatherapy, visualization, and deeper relationships speak to the spirit in all humans, especially elders. "Age doesn't protect you from love but love may protect you from unhealthy aging."