



Qualities of Happy, Healthy Centenarians

By Noelle Nelson, PhD

I REMEMBER BOTH MY GRANDMOTHERS, and both of them were considered old by their late fifties. They were expected to do no more than sit quietly, placidly, while the world moved around them, a role they accepted without protest. My maternal grandmother would crochet little dresses for our dolls. My dad's mom would "fuss," as my mother put it. She would squint through her reading glasses, looking for something to dust or rearrange, and get up slowly every so often to do so. The grandmothers were to be spared any hard work or aggravation. "Don't bother your grandmother!" was the most frequent refrain we children heard during family get-togethers.

That has changed, have you noticed? Sixty may not be the new forty, and who knows if seventy is the new fifty, but one thing is for sure: many people are living longer, and more are refusing the sedentary approach to their later years.

A long, happy, healthy life—that's what most of us are aiming for. And yet, our mental picture of anyone over seventy-five is that their quality of life is questionable, and those over eighty, ninety, a hundred, even more so. Television is rife with ads promoting cures or solace for the infirmities that we are all supposedly doomed to as we age: Alzheimer's, incontinence, diabetic neuralgia, chronic pain, ill health, and the need for wheelchairs and walkers. We are told that without an electronic device slung around our necks to summon help, we will crumple to the ground from a heart attack and die there, wretched, alone, and in agony. It is no wonder that no one wants to grow old, that old age scares the heck out of us.

Granted, no one gets out of here alive, but let's at least live until it's time to die. Let our emphasis be on how happy we can make ourselves, such that our focus is on "happy and healthy," with "dead" being but a final punctuation mark. Yes, there are some older individuals who suffer from Alzheimer's, severe cognitive impairment, arthritic joints, broken hips, and a whole host of other afflictions, but there are far more individuals in their teens, twenties, thirties, and forties who are dealing with a variety of



disorders such as cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, deformed or amputated limbs, an astonishing array of injuries from various accidents, and cognitive issues of all kinds.

The difference is that people don't automatically assign an entire class of individuals—except for the elderly—to certain misery just by virtue of their age. Past the age of sixty-five, and certainly by the time people hit seventy, pretty much everyone today expects them to need a walker, be diabetic, and have heart issues. This despite the fact that, according to the 2011 US Census Bureau's report, only 3.1 percent of the total population sixty-five years old and over live in nursing homes.

These beliefs are still held, even though well-known figures are living active, healthy lives that demonstrate otherwise. Clint Eastwood, at eighty-four, directed the award-winning *American Sniper* and *Jersey Boys* movies, both released in 2014. Angela Lansbury, at eighty-nine, toured England and the United States in 2014 in the title role of *Noel Coward's Blithe Spirit*, for which she had received a Tony in 2009.

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Dick Van Dyke, at eighty-eight, completed work on *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb* in 2014 and, at eighty-nine, starred in a music video for folk music band Dustbowl Revival in 2015. He just celebrated his ninetieth birthday by joining a flash mob and singing tunes from some of his musical films.

Lest you think you have to be in show business to live a long, happy, productive life, consider Henry Kissinger. In 2014, at the age of ninety-one, Kissinger published *World Order* (New York, Penguin Press), his most recent of more than a dozen books on politics and international relations. He continues to be active in a number of groups and think tanks concerned with foreign relations, among other activities.

In the 2010 US census, there were 53,364 centenarians, defined as people one hundred years old and older—a 5.8 percent increase from the 2000 census, when there were 50,454 people who were at least one hundred years old. This means that of the total population in 2010, one out of every 5,786 people was a centenarian. Given those figures, it is likely that wherever you live, there are one or more centenarians living close by.

Healthy, happy centenarians defy the stereotype of decrepit old age. They are active and involved in life and living. How do centenarians do that thing they do—live for so long, active and healthy? Is it their diet, exercise, weight management, or alcohol- or smoke-free lifestyle?

Grandma always told me not to let others define me. She said, “If you don't love yourself, no one else will.”

—Kandace Jones in *From Stress to Peace*, page 12, John Hunt Publishing, 2014

No. Amazingly enough, some centenarians drink alcohol, others don't; some eat "healthy," others don't; some pay attention to their weight, others don't; some smoke, others don't; some exercise, others wouldn't dream of it.

These are not reasons to cut loose with unhealthy foods and tequila shots and declare that being a couch potato is the life for you (because all those behaviors do indeed negatively impact your short- and long-term health). However, what is abundantly clear is that centenarians pursue a variety of lifestyles.

Some centenarians have downright intriguing habits to which they attribute their longevity. One 110-year-old advocates drinking a can of beer a day. A 107-year-old attributes her long life to drinking lots of coffee. A female 109-er says staying away from men will do it. (You have to wonder what the men are supposed to do.) A 115-year-old Italian advocates eating raw eggs. A 116-year-old Japanese says to "sunbathe," and a 117-year-old says, "Eat sushi."

The one thing—the only thing—that centenarians have in common is their positive attitude. They aren't

whiners. They are happy. They are optimistic. Above all, the long-lived appreciate the ordinary moments of everyday life.

You can choose thoughts that support positive emotions just as you can choose thoughts that support negative emotions. You may think being happy, optimistic, positive, and appreciative are nice ways to feel, pleasant ways to go about life, but they go far beyond momentary feel-goods. Happiness, optimism, positive attitude, and appreciation have tremendous consequences for your physical well-being and your longevity. They may, in fact, be the link between you today and a happy, healthy you tomorrow—and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Δ

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