

Healthy Aging: The Role of a Positive Attitude

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When you watch television most of the images you see of older adults are skewed. What you usually see depicts the problems associated with getting older and story lines that include cranky and stubborn characters. Strong leading roles and positive advertising images of older adults are few and far between.

The depiction of older adults we see in the media is reflected in society's thoughts about getting older. A large study by the Pew Research Center reveals, though, that old age is not what most of the general public think it is. When surveyed, young adults viewed aging as fraught with illness, memory loss, loneliness, depression and money problems. So what is the reality of getting older? Older adults answering the same questions reported having these problems far less often than young people projected on every account. The fact is that aging is not a steep downhill journey for most people. Entering your 80's and 90's still includes plenty of opportunities for personal growth, new friendships and having fun.

The truth about getting older is that the average American today may well live to the age 80 and beyond. And with improvements in preventive care, medical treatments and healthy lifestyles, the majority of older adults are enjoying active, independent lives. While aging can bring about change in some aspects of life, older adults surveyed report good health and a positive outlook on life. According to the Pew study:

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- Six in ten of older adults said they felt younger than their age.
- Seven in ten say they enjoy more time with family and friends.
- Two out of three older adults say they are more financially secure.
- Six in ten say they feel less stressed than when they were younger.
- Forty-five percent of those over age 75 said their life turned out better than they expected.



These statistics and other studies suggest it is not just your physical health and genes that matter as you age. Some health problems may be more common as you age but a healthy lifestyle and positive attitude make a huge difference in aging well. Your attitude actually plays a major role. Upbeat people with a positive attitude are often rewarded with better health and quality of life. Those with negative views about aging tend to fulfill their own poor prognosis.

The secret is not to think of yourself as over-the-hill. In a seven-year study of 1,558 healthy older adults, those with positive outlooks were much less likely than the pessimists to show signs of frailty as they aged. So it is important for your health to stay positive and think of yourself as smart, capable, dignified and experienced.

Feeling good about yourself and your life seems to have a protective effect against functional and physical decline. Studies show a positive outlook can even help you recover faster after an illness or surgery. More research is needed, but scientists think that upbeat emotions may alter the biological and chemical balance of your body and promote better health and a longer life. And these are good reasons to stay positive, be happy and enjoy life at every age!