

AGING AND THRIVING: WHILE AGING IS A GIVEN, THRIVING IS AN OPTION

Peggy Crawford, PhD, Clinical Health Psychologist

November 12, 2024

AGING: What happens as we age?

Increases: Prescription medications, medical appointments, aches and pains, falls, weight, waistline, conditions listed in our medical records, day-to-day body maintenance, feelings of vulnerability, time, feelings of loneliness and social isolation, new people and activities

Decreases: Muscle mass and bone density, physical strength, vision and hearing, sleep, balance, cognitive function, energy, appetite, safety, financial security, people and support

COMPONENTS OF HEALTHY AGING PROVIDE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE AND THRIVING

Keep in mind, what's good for one component is likely to be good for other components.

Physical Health

Keep moving, eat healthy, sleep well, stay connected to people and activities

Avoid smoking, reduce or avoid alcohol, and reduce stress

Brain and Cognitive Health

Educate yourself about what normally changes with age vs those changes that are not normal

Paying attention is necessary for forming memories

Pursue lifelong learning

Use compensatory strategies such as calendars, pill boxes, routines to enhance your function

Watch Lisa Genova's TED talks, "How your memory works and why forgetting is totally normal" and "What you can do to prevent Alzheimer's Disease"

Emotional, Behavioral, and Social Health

Monitor your mood, behavior and stress as well as how you deal with it. Ask others for feedback.

Depression and anxiety can affect your brain functioning, your sleep, your behavior and your relationships.

Stay connected to people via old and new activities.

Social isolation and loneliness are risk factors for our physical health. They are more deadly than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Staying connected can become more difficult as we age with changes in our mobility, driving, vision, hearing, memory, finances, having fewer family and friends.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development started tracking male students in 1938 and found that having close relationships is the best predictor of longevity and happiness. In the UK, they have had a "Loneliness Minister" since 2018 to address increasing social isolation and loneliness. Many people are talking and writing about this issue, including Dr. Vivek Murthy, our Surgeon General and Nicolas Kristof, journalist for the NYTs.

Solo Agers aka kinless and elder orphans are adults with no close family members to rely on either by choice (not partnered, no children) or circumstance (divorce, death, distance, strained relationships).

Solo Agers are likely to face challenges such as:

Identifying someone to serve as Health Care Proxy and Financial POA

Having someone to you call in the middle of the night when ill or in case of emergency

Feeling responsible for just about everything (all decisions, car maintenance, paperwork)

THRIVING is growing in healthy and strong ways. It's about making strides, moving forward, being open to the possibility of change and being resilient.

Resilience is the ability to rebound from adversity, to adapt to setbacks and challenges, finding ways to regain a sense of balance, being proactive, standing up for yourself. Resilience can be learned!

People Who are Thriving and Resilient

Live with purpose, passion, persistence and patience

Focus on what they can do rather than what they can't do, so hopeful and optimistic but practical

More likely to be flexible and adaptable

Usually engaged in lifelong learning

Kind, empathic and supportive of others as well as themselves (self-care and self-compassion)

Willing to challenge themselves and move out of their comfort zone

Seek help and input from others

Thriving can be challenged and disrupted by:

Changes with our health (accident, injury, surgery, illness)

Changes in our resources and circumstances (physical and emotional status, finances, living situation, death of a loved one)

Ageism, discrimination based on our age, e.g., when assumptions are made about us, our hearing and vision, mental abilities, functional abilities, what we know about ourselves and our needs. In the health care system, this can result in overtreatment (too many medications, tests, procedures, appointments) and undertreatment (our concerns are dismissed and/or minimized, "it's to be expected at your age," so we don't receive the attention, respect and care we need and deserve).

When we experience a disruption:

Life might feel out of balance and how to regain that balance may not be obvious.

We might find ourselves on an unexpected detour, maybe wondering if we should change our destination, feel unsure of our direction, our goals and plans.

These disruptions can distract us from what we were doing and make us doubt ourselves.

We might push our "pause button" and get stuck in that "off" position for too long.

On the other hand, a disruption can be the kick in the butt, the motivation, the wakeup call we need to make a change that will support our ongoing growth and thriving.

MAKING CHANGES THAT SUPPORT THRIVING

Potential Benefits That Can Come with Making Changes:

Healthier lifestyle with fewer physical and mood symptoms, less stress.

More positive feelings about ourselves, greater self-confidence and self-esteem.

Identification of opportunities for learning, engaging in new activities, and interacting with people.

Building of greater resilience in preparation for the next disruption.

Thinking about the benefits encourages us to try things even if we're not sure, feel uncomfortable and haven't been given a guaranteed outcome.

Steps Involved in Making Successful Changes:

Use SMART Goals--Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-based.

Possible targets for change—your lifestyle, a 1-time task, something you've put off.

Identify benefits for change up front because doing this is motivating.

Break your change into smaller steps to increase your chances of success.

Come up with a way to monitor your progress, e.g., on your phone, computer or in writing.

Tell someone what you're doing and let that person know how she could help you, e.g., with encouragement, support, feedback, regular check ins, engaging in the activity with you.

Anticipate possible obstacles and challenges and how to deal with them.

Be kind to yourself, be patient, adjust your goals as needed, give yourself positive feedback rather than criticism.

Potential Challenges and Obstacles to Change:

Your goals are too big, too general, and way too complicated.

Resistance to change—fear of doing it wrong, change is uncomfortable, no time or energy, the cost.

Reluctance to leave your comfort zone because maybe you've always done it this way, it feels too difficult, it will take too much time.

Another one of those life disturbances might occur and disrupt your plans.

Discomfort asking for help because you don't want to be a burden; you feel vulnerable; you assume people are busy, won't help how and when you want and they should already know what you need.

You listen too much to people who discourage you rather than to yourself

You struggle to make yourself a priority because "that would be selfish."

SO WHAT CHANGE ARE YOU THINKING OF WORKING ON?

AGING RESOURCES

"What We Know About Healthy Aging" from National Institute on Aging

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/healthy-aging/what-do-we-know-about-healthy-aging>

From Mayo Clinic, "Aging: What to Expect" reviews all the body systems, how they're affected by aging and what to do to be healthy.

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/healthy-aging/in-depth/aging/art-20046070>

"Ageism in health care is more common than you think, and it can harm people" from NPR, 3/7/24.

<https://www.kawc.org/npr-news/2024-03-07/ageism-in-health-care-is-more-common-than-you-might-think-and-it-can-harm-people>

COGNITIVE HEALTH:

TED talks by Lisa Genova, neuroscientist and author of "Still Alice". Google them:

"How your memory works and why forgetting is totally normal," includes examples of very common memory problems that are not associated with Alzheimer's Disease.

"What you can do to prevent Alzheimer's Disease" has great graphics and clear explanations.

EMOTIONAL, BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH:

Three Good Things: An effective way to tune into the positive events in your life.

<https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/three-good-things>

Anticipatory Joy Mindful Meditation from the Mindfulness Project:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIOSGdek7LQ&t=325s>

SOCIAL ISOLATION, LONELINESS AND RELATIONSHIPS:

NIH, Research Highlights, 4'19. "Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks."

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/news/social-isolation-loneliness-older-people-pose-health-risks>

Nicholas Kristof's piece in NYTimes September 19, 2023, "What We Can Do to Help Reduce Loneliness." <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/19/opinion/letters/loneliness.html>

"Senior Loneliness: How It Impacts Health, and What To Do About It," Where you Live Matters <https://www.wherelivematters.org/resources/aging-isolation-and-the-value-of-connectedness/>

Robert Waldinger's TED talk, "The Secret to a Happy Life—Lessons from 8 decades of Research," January 10, 2023.

NAVIGATING SOLO AND KINLESS:

Podcast on Solo Aging with Ailene Gerhardt and Peggy Crawford

<https://navigatingsolo.podbean.com/e/thriving-solo-navigating-lifes-unexpected-journeys-with-dr-peggy-crawford/>

Ailene Gerhardt, MA, BCPA, CSA, Independent Board Certified Patient Advocate and Solo Aging, Educator and Advocate, Certified Senior Advisor (CSA) and founder of Beacon Patient Solutions.

<https://navigatingsolo.com/> and www.beaconpatientsolutions.com

CHANGE RESOURCES:

"Long-lasting healthy changes: Doable and worthwhile," Harvard Health Publishing, 9/14/21

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/long-lasting-healthy-changes-doable-and-worthwhile-202109142594>

"Why You Resist Change and What to Do About It," Psychology Today, 10/29/22.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/from-striving-to-thriving/202210/why-you-resist-change-and-what-to-do-about-it>

"3 Reasons Why It's So Hard to Ask for Help," Psychology Today, June 2022

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/connected-leadership/202206/3-reasons-why-its-so-hard-ask-help>

"Is It Time to Leave Your Comfort Zone? How Leaving Can Spark Positive Change," Jessica A Kent, Harvard Summer School, 5/24/23. <https://summer.harvard.edu/blog/leaving-your-comfort-zone/>

"In Praise of Tiny Triumphs" by Melissa Kirsch, NYT, 3/30/24.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/30/briefing/in-praise-of-tiny-triumphs.html>