
Positive Aging

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Case Study

At age 81, Bob, a former military pilot, oil industry executive, and entrepreneur, happened upon and joined a community-based organization offering college-level academic courses, fitness activities, and opportunities for social interactions for those over 55. He reports that at the time he was suffering from neuropathies and other physical ailments, tiring easily, and experiencing muscle aches that impaired his mobility, so he lacked any regular physical activity. He experienced diminishing interest in leaving the house as he noticed what he perceived as his declining state. After a series of lifestyle changes offered in this new group, he discovered improved quality of life and better physical and mental status in his eighth decade. As a result of incorporating increased socialization, moderate group fitness activities, walking, group practice of life review, a literature discussion group, and other similar activities, Bob reported, at age 86, that his neuropathies were disappearing and his mental and psychological outlook had reversed. After a fall in a bathroom, he was able to get up by himself, a feat he attributed to his functional fitness training at his senior community program.

In the life story group, he wrote vignettes that brought back long-forgotten memories that he enjoys sharing with family and friends. One study found that the protocol his group used decreased depressive symptoms in older adults.¹ Another literature appreciation group he joined has supplied joy and laughter he seldom experienced in any other settings and at any other time in his life. The friends he has made have truly proven the meaning and value of “community.”

Bob's story represents numerous others like himself who demonstrate that progressive decline and deterioration can at least be slowed, and in his case were actually reversed. In this chapter, we share a variety of tools to achieve such results.

Introduction

People gather every day in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute—OLLI at UTMB Health with friends, and others who will become friends, as they expand their social, intellectual, physical, and spiritual dimensions. Ages 55 to 105, these folks represent a new archetype of aging where the final years of life are filled with meaning, fulfillment, hope, and opportunities for generativity. As a group, they offer living confirmation that while certain aspects of the aging process alter physical, mental, and social capabilities, new coping mechanisms and new perspectives encourage a more dynamic view of longevity and the tools to achieve that.

In this chapter, we share case histories that allow you to meet individuals whose stories will equip you with options and resources to share with your patients and clients. Marsha, for instance, heard her geriatrician warn that she had to make major lifestyle changes or suffer serious health consequences. She started with a modest indoor walking practice, added seated fitness, then was ready for yoga, and finally completed a 5K fun run/walk, resulting in improved clinical lab markers. She achieved a remarkable improvement in self-esteem and outlook, developing a group of new friends who provided support and encouragement for her healthy lifestyle choices. Those choices and activities served as a springboard to improving Marsha's social, intellectual, and creative pursuits.

Larry's wife suffered a protracted illness that required his devoted attentiveness for years. After her death, he was an adrift and inconsolable widower. His daughter encouraged participation in community activities but he resisted. After some months, he succumbed to her persistence and began enjoying ballroom dance classes with a new-found friend, which led to his involvement in yoga, nutrition, and healthy eating classes, followed by numerous other experiences luring him to join his new community of friends for one learning and living experience or another every day, filling his life with joy and meaning. He transformed a hopeless future into a vital new reality by making new choices and opening himself to new experiences and people.

Harold's perspective on dating after 80 will bring you to the heart of longing and late-life love. A former health care provider himself, he understood the physiological and psychological components of how one might experience

emptiness after decades in a committed relationship to find oneself alone and lonely.

Let us then meet the new aging cohort, the face of aging in the future. Here, later life becomes an adventure in creativity, the arts, humanities, and artistic expression, whether in music, dance, art, poetry, creative writing, or personal reflection. Yoga, tai chi, walking, ballroom dance, and water aerobics offer possibilities for vibrant growth rather than the stereotype of inevitable decline in the later years of life. Most of the individuals we introduce participate in an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute on a barrier island off the Texas Gulf Coast. At this writing there are 119 OLLIs across the nation. In the United States and beyond, thousands of other academies for lifelong learning, institutes for learning in retirement, and senior centers offer an endless array of opportunities for socialization, physical activity, volunteering, and self-improvement.

Get a Move On!

“The motion is the lotion” summarizes a sound theory in rehabilitation. Those committed to healthy lifestyles at any age must develop enjoyable, sustainable forms of physical activity. Sometimes favored sports or physical activity from earlier stages in life can be continued as one grows older. Those fortunate enough to continue lifelong practices, such as the 92-year-old competitive ballroom dancer, likely represent the minority.

Often, realities of an aging body or other factors may preclude pick-up basketball, hours on the golf course, touch football, or daily jogging. However, options for age-appropriate movement activities abound for aging individuals. Walking, a universal pastime, can be done almost anywhere, at any time, and by most people. One study explored the value of walking compared to ballroom dance for effectiveness in preventing cognitive decline. The authors concluded, “A physically active lifestyle has the potential to prevent cognitive decline and dementia, yet the optimal type of physical activity/exercise remains unclear.”² Like many other studies, the message is to keep in motion. Walking can be done safely in most places, but indoor walking tracks or even the neighborhood shopping mall may provide a climate-controlled environment, making walking possible in any weather.

Ballroom dance continues to prove an effective (and fun) method for enhancing both physical and mental capacity. Some studies have examined the value of tai chi for falls prevention, balance, and gait issues. One study found that ballroom dance and tai chi both had benefits.³

Yoga has been shown to have positive health benefits in a multitude of ways, including memory enhancement training;⁴ it also provides an effective

motivational attraction for those who participate.⁵ According to that study, only activities that bring pleasure and personal satisfaction will become a regular, sustainable practice.

Whether science supports tai chi over yoga or ballroom dance over walking or whatever the comparison, here is a crucial point: “Providing diversity in exercise programs targeting seniors recognises the heterogeneity of multicultural populations and may further increase the number of taking part in exercise.”² In other words, by providing numerous options and thus encouragement for fitness activities, participants can find the style of activity that best suits their needs, interests, and lifestyle. One review article covers a variety of suggestions.⁶ As mobility declines, some activities like yoga and tai chi can even be adapted by using chairs. Water therapy is another example of a positive physiotherapy and exercise that allows those with painful joints to move in the buoyancy and support of water.

Creative Expression, Play, Dance, Art, Theater

The National Center for Creative Aging (NCCA) challenges us to “Envision a world where all individuals flourish across their lifespan through creative expression.” The center is “dedicated to fostering an understanding of the vital relationship between creative expression and healthy aging, and to developing programs that build upon this understanding in a world where all individuals flourish across their lifespan through creative expression.”⁷

Consider incorporating art, music, dance, exercise, poetry/literature, theater, life reflection, and coupling and sexuality in prognosis and treatment plans for your clients/patients. Take cues and advice from NCCA, then look to your own community for options and opportunities. Check out your local YMCA, YWCA, county extension service, community college, faith-based organization, or some other group that provides opportunities for art, music, dance, or other creative outlets for older adults. Refer patients to these resources as part of their treatment plan for lifestyle choices.

Meaning, Generativity, and Sexuality in Aging

Eric Erikson,⁸ George Vaillant,⁹ and others commonly accept generativity as promoting growth in others who are younger. Meaning in life, quality of life, and generativity have expanded to include promoting growth in others of any age. Great power results when older adults share their wisdom and life experiences with younger generations to educate, encourage,

and empower. In later years, though, any of the categories discussed in this chapter, creative expression, life reflection, meditation, gratitude, even physical activity, can provide opportunities for mentoring, inspiring, and challenging others. A grandmother who practices yoga or Pilates three times a week or an uncle who blogs regularly might motivate someone from a younger generation. Those practices can be equally motivating to a friend, neighbor, or sibling of a similar or even older age. Whether going to a fitness session, attending a lecture, or painting a watercolor, aging individuals challenge their peers by simply showing up and continuing the practice, thus setting an example.

Elders might fulfill the longing for generativity by sharing their artistic and creative skills mentoring local schoolchildren of any age. In our community, partnerships with local school districts and art organizations welcome older adults with time and talent to give and wisdom to impart. While mentoring others, older adults can also fulfill their personal needs for creativity. A local arts and environmental group offers a course on sustaining wetlands. The experience culminates in enhanced environmental awareness and leads to opportunities to participate in environmental projects while mentoring others. Boys and Girls Clubs seek “grandparents” for children. One man satisfies his longing for theatrical performance by playing Santa Claus, generativity and creativity intersecting in his life.

Older adults sometimes have formalized roles in generativity through educating future health care providers. Medical students, resident physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals who rotate through community-based programs for older adults gain a rich perspective on the possibilities and tools available to achieve healthy aging. In one study, “Preliminary results using descriptive analysis revealed an increase in positive images of aging and a decrease in negative images of aging among the five student participants.”¹⁰

Sexuality and the need for intimacy continue after a loved one passes away. One man wrote about this in his life story group, describing “dating” as complicated and confusing. “At 80, I had the advantage that the female-to-male ratio of singles over 70 seemed about 50 to 1. I soon found dating in high school and college is quite different from dating by the aged. The biggest problem was ‘intimacy’. If I/we were to go on a cruise around the world, the expense of two cabins would be prohibitive. Also I did not know my own capabilities and, having the medical knowledge of aged women’s difficulties, I had trouble approaching the subject.” One study in Spain reported, “Residential Aging Care Facilities staff should have an opportunity to receive training on residents’ sexuality, as sexual interest and behavior is a key dimension of residents’ lives.”¹¹

Conclusions

The Alzheimer's Association believes that "The public should know what the science concludes: certain healthy behaviors known to be effective for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer are also good for brain health and for reducing the risk of cognitive decline."¹² They have launched a new brain health education program, *Healthy Habits for a Healthier You*. Like Stanford's Sightlines Project, the aim is to provide a combination of current research and useful information about ways that consumers "can take care of their bodies and brains to age as well as possible."¹² Healthy lifestyle choices can and must become a norm for positive aging. In *Seven Strategies for Positive Aging*, Robert D. Hill asserts "the characteristics of positive aging come from practicing strategies that promote optimal adjustment in old age."¹³

The following is a list of key online resources, but please consider expanding your horizon to many others. Investigate each website with caution as you assess evidence-based criteria. Aging services must offer evidence in order for you to devote resources to those you serve.

- *The Creativity and Aging Study*—Landmark study on the effects of arts participation on an aging population (<https://cahh.gwu.edu/arts-aging-study>). This study, the first controlled study to assess whether participation in the creative arts, apart from traditional medical care, can promote healthier aging was led by Gene D. Cohen, MD.
- *Think Positive about Aging and Live Longer*, by Mark Stibich, PhD (http://longevity.about.com/od/mentalfitness/p/positive_aging.htm). Research shows that how you perceive aging affects how long you will live. In a study of 660 people, those with more positive perceptions of their own aging lived an average of 7.5 years longer. This effect remained after other factors such as age, gender, income, loneliness, and health status were controlled.
- *Program for Positive Aging*—a place for everyone's brighter future (<http://www.programforpositiveaging.org/>). Positive aging involves more than just maintaining good health for as long as possible. Physical wellness is vital and valuable, but it isn't the whole solution. Positive aging is also about quality of life and enjoyment of living. Overall wellness depends upon attitude, spirit, resilience, and adaptability to the new opportunities and challenges of later life.
- *Positive Aging Newsletter* from the Taos Institute (<http://www.taosinstitute.net/positive-aging-newsletter>): The newsletter brings to light resources—from scientific research on aging, gerontology practices, and daily life—that contribute to an appreciation of the aging process.

Challenging the longstanding view of aging as decline, the newsletter provides resources for understanding aging as an unprecedented period of human development.

- *The Sightlines Project* at Stanford University (<http://longevity3.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Sightlines-Project.pdf>): Seeing our way to living long and living well in 21st-century America.

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