

MAKING THE MOST OF AGING BY TAKING “REACHES” STEPS

By Diana Spore, MHRB

Research, theoretical essays, and academic debates, focusing on the concept of “successful aging,” resulted in changing the commonly-held viewpoint that aging is a time of progressive decline. The resultant anti-ageist focus emphasizes aging as a time of growth, of being able to age “successfully” through personal choices and lifestyle decisions. The word “successful” may inadvertently stigmatize those who are deemed to be “unsuccessful” or implied as “failures.” Alternative words have been bounced around: resilient, productive, healthy, optimal, positive, harmonious. Likewise, various phrases have been used as alternatives to “aging successfully” – aging gracefully, aging well, aging with dignity.

Seniors have faced many challenges across their lives and overcome aging-related “problems or issues.” What steps can be taken to thrive under fire? For this article – the focus is on “making the most of aging,” celebrating and embracing aging DESPITE challenges faced, adversity, social inequality, Alzheimer’s Disease and dementia, diversity in functional and health status, and more. The aging population is heterogeneous in nature. As boomers age and the aging population grows, the issue of how to age well has pressing political and fiscal implications.

What does it take to make the most of aging, practical steps (using acronym REACHES) that can be implemented by seniors as they reach toward making the most of aging? “Reaches” steps focus on **R = RESILIENCE, E = EMPOWERMENT, A = ACTIVE, ENGAGEMENT, C = CONNECTING; H = HEALTH, E = EMOTIONAL WELLBEING, S = SPIRITUALITY.**

“REACHES” STEPS

R = RESILIENCE – Building and strengthening resilience is a process, and can be strived for. Being resilient means bouncing back from adversity, being able to adapt to whatever heads our way, having strong coping skills, using relaxation techniques, being flexible, and retaining a positive attitude. In order to be resilient, one needs to be engaged, to have a strong support network, to be as healthy as possible.

What can strengthen resilience? Reach out to family members, friends, and caregivers; agencies in the aging network; pastor, priest, minister or rabbi; mental health professionals; and health care providers when help is needed or you need information. Finding resilience means embracing the strength you hold within, and reaching out for assistance and support when needed or helpful. You do not have to walk alone.

E = EMPOWERMENT – It is important for seniors to be decision-makers, and to have and act on choices, to the extent that is possible. Be empowered by (1) advocating for self and others; (2) being assertive, setting boundaries, strengthening resilience, engaging in self-care, developing strong, respectful, and healthy family- or intergenerational relationships; (3) using mediation services if there are conflicts with family members. Develop legal documents – in advance – in the event that you become unable to speak for yourself, challenged about level of competence. Consider who can be counted on to follow YOUR wishes – who will serve as your

health care POA, financial POA, and/or POA, who will be listed on your living will and advance directives (including directives about psychiatric care). Have discussions with family members about your wishes – what you want done if you are no longer able to live independently, if you have a terminal diagnosis, if you learn that you have dementia. Make your positions known, and set things in motion so that your wishes will be followed.

A = ACTIVE, BEING ENGAGED – Remain physically active; after consulting with your physician, develop and implement an exercise plan. Take walks and enjoy the beauty of nature or sharing quality time with your canine companion. Consider taking advantage of programming at the local YMCA (Silver Sneakers, swimming).

Be engaged in all other aspects of your life – cognitively (addressed in this section), socially, spiritually, and emotionally. Continue to move forward with educational pursuits – read, take classes at the university or courses online, travel, attend community “learning” events (e.g., during Elder Empowerment Month), and take advantage of programming at the Council on Aging and libraries. Spend time working on word puzzles, learning new languages, playing videogames and competing against someone else, developing new computer skills.

C = CONNECTING – There are many ways to stay connected with family members and strengthen bonds along the way. Attend family gatherings, honor family holiday traditions, go on trips together (e.g., going back to where you lived as a child), develop family mementoes as you share your legacy (e.g., memory quilts, family scrapbooks and newsletters, memory boxes, time capsules), and stay in touch via phone, letters, cards, skyping and more. Stay connected with others by engaging in activities together, by having conversations, by sharing meals, by joining groups. Forge bonds and be engaged through volunteering. Connect with others through writing and sharing creative works of written art.

As far as “connecting” with yourself and others, particularly if you live with dementia, explore the use of creative expressions. While those who have moderate-to-severe dementia may have difficulty with oral communication and writing, there are many benefits to using art as a form of personal expression as well as a vehicle for connecting with others.

H= HEALTH – Be proactive in preserving/improving your health and in limiting the impact of progressive chronic diseases and functional limitations. Do the basics – stay well, eat a nutritious diet, sleep well, visit health care professionals routinely and when needed, be well-informed and engaged in decisions made about physical health care services. Forge a partnership with your physician and engage in shared decision-making, ask questions and keep records, stay on top of preventive care options. Think about your role in maintaining health and what it means to be a “good” patient, what you need to follow through on (e.g., keeping routine and “as needed” appointments, taking tests and undergoing procedures). If you make the decision not to follow through or find that you are having problems with being compliant (e.g., drug side effects), keep your doctor informed. Ultimately, you will make the decision (or along with a family member or caregiver) about implementing and continuing with health care recommendations but you need to be well-informed about possible ramifications.

E = EMOTIONAL WELLBEING – Embrace and celebrate aging, stay connected with others, develop a strong support system, maintain a positive attitude, be engaged in all aspects of your life, find ways to preserve happiness, develop coping and mastery skills. Reach out to others – who you trust and can count on -- when you need emotional support. Consider seeking mental health services (e.g., therapy) for treating and managing symptoms, learning how to reduce stress effectively and safely, receiving trauma-informed care.

S = SPIRITUALITY – Participation in religious activities and engagement in spiritual behaviors have been associated with health and overall wellbeing. Religious activities can include going to church services, praying, attending bible study classes. While spirituality and religiosity do not require being part of a group process, celebrating God (or some Higher Being) and His “message” with others can help to develop a strong sense of community, forge strong social connections grounded in faith, charity, and love. Building a spiritual connection can result by engaging in yoga, mindfulness, and meditation.

CLOSING COMMENTS

We all can reach for and strive to live life fully, to embrace and celebrate aging, to make the most of our lives as we age. We can take steps on this path toward making the most of aging as individuals, reflected in the personal choices we take and the lifestyle changes we make across time. However, social inequality, functional and health disparities, differential rates of disability play a role in how common “successful” aging will be among seniors. Most of us can strengthen resilience despite of or in response to challenges – including traumatic experiences – faced. In some instances, family members and caregivers may be called on to help seniors to remain empowered and to age well and independently.

For information about seeking help through the mental health network, contact David Ross, MHRB (419-281-3139). Contact agencies in the aging network for assistance and referrals – Council on Aging (419-281-1477) or Area Agency on Aging District 5 (1-800-860-5799).

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