

# Aging in Good Health

*Lives of Meaning  
and Purpose*



by United Neighborhood Houses



# About Us

**United Neighborhood Houses**, founded in 1919, is the membership organization of 38 New York City settlement houses and community centers. UNH member organizations comprise one of the largest human service systems in New York City and provide high-quality services at more than 600 locations to more than 750,000 New Yorkers each year. Through capacity building, program development, and advocacy, UNH is helping to redefine the relationships between older adults and local senior centers, community organizations, and the broader neighborhood. UNH is proud to be at the forefront of building this new field of practice based upon the strengths and assets of community members of all generations.

## About the Author

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September, 2017



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# Introduction

Thanks to the advances of modern medicine, older adults in the United States are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. The United States is experiencing a “longevity revolution.”<sup>1</sup> The average life span has increased by a full 25 years since the early 1900s, with most people expected to live to at least 80 years old.<sup>2</sup> The tremendous growth in the aging population offers unique opportunities for older adults to positively engage in and contribute to their communities. Despite this marked growth and the changes it brings to society, little attention has been paid to ensure that there is purpose and meaning attached to longer life, and how purpose and meaning are important to health and well-being.

Traditionally, good health in older adults has been defined as the absence of disease or disability, and success is often measured in the avoidance of hospitalization or nursing home stays. Recently, studies on health in older adults have expanded to examine positive attitudes and outlooks as predictors of good physical health outcomes and longevity in older adults. Overwhelmingly, this new research is showing that when older adults have a sense of purpose in life, they live longer and tend to have better physical and mental health. Building on these findings, this issue brief examines studies that explore the strong connections between

purpose in life, community and social engagement, and physical and mental health. This brief highlights research around five key themes regarding these connections:

- Purpose in life and feeling useful
- Social activity to fight cognitive decline
- Control over and responsibility for one’s own life
- Positive self-perception and challenging negative stereotypes around aging, and
- Social engagement and volunteerism.

These themes often overlap in older adulthood. Researchers are increasingly finding that older adults who remain active and exhibit positive attitudes and outlooks tend to live longer and experience positive health outcomes as they age.

*This paper will generally use “health” to include both physical and mental health.*

## Purpose in Life and Usefulness

In the last decade, a growing number of researchers have examined how attitude affects physical health and longevity and vice versa, embracing the idea that living is not merely surviving, but enjoying a meaningful and productive life. A number of studies have found positive correlations between purpose in life/usefulness to others and increased longevity and improved health in older adults.

In 2009, a study was conducted on 1,238 older adults to determine whether purpose in life was associated with longevity and positive physical health. During the five years of follow-up, the researchers found an association between individuals who scored higher on a purpose in life scale (see box) and a substantially reduced risk of death, with no variance based on participants' age, race, gender, or educational level. The findings also indicate that purpose in life may safeguard against negative health outcomes in older adults. The results of this study suggest that having a sense of purpose and goals in life leads to longevity and positive health outcomes, most likely because of the high levels of engagement and activity involved.<sup>3</sup>

Other research supports this finding that a sense of purpose leads to longevity and improved health outcomes. A 2004 study in Japan examined feelings of usefulness in older adults as a predictor of health and mortality over a six-year period. Interviewers administered questionnaires to 784 participants over 65 in rural Japan to determine participants' subjective sense of usefulness to others. The results indicate that the subjective sense of usefulness in older adults enhances and promotes better health and well-being and reduces mortality.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a 2007 U.S. study examined the feelings of usefulness in older adults as a predictor of disability or death in participants, a group of high functioning adults aged 70-79, during a seven-year trial. The researchers defined disability as the onset of a decrease in activities of daily living (bathing, dressing, toileting, transferring, continence, feeding)<sup>5</sup> and mobility disability based on the ability to walk a half mile, walk up and down stairs, and perform heavy housework. Researchers examined a number of factors that may influence usefulness, including social activity and social relations, as well as psychological states such as perceptions of self-efficacy, personal mastery, and depressed mood. The results indicate that individuals who never or rarely felt useful were three times more likely to experience an increase in disability and had four times the odds of dying over individuals who frequently felt useful throughout the seven-year study.<sup>6</sup> The results of these studies demonstrate a positive correlation between purpose in life and feelings of usefulness to others with increased positive physical health and longevity.

A number of studies jointly compiled by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services show a link between participation in arts programs and positive health outcomes in older adults. One study found that healthy older adults who participated in a chorale program exhibited higher overall physical health including fewer doctor visits, less medication use, and fewer falls, as well as better morale and less loneliness than the comparison group. Another study found that older adults who participated in a theatrical training program scored significantly higher on recall, problem-solving, and psychological well-being than control groups. Other researchers studied the effects of a story-telling program on older adults with dementia who were residing in a long-term care facility. Those who took part in the program were found to be more alert and engaged than the control group. These studies and others suggest that arts engagement encourages health-promoting behaviors that address cognitive decline and frailty in older adults.<sup>7</sup> Participation in arts-related programming provides older adults a purpose in life, resulting in improved quality of life and positive health outcomes.

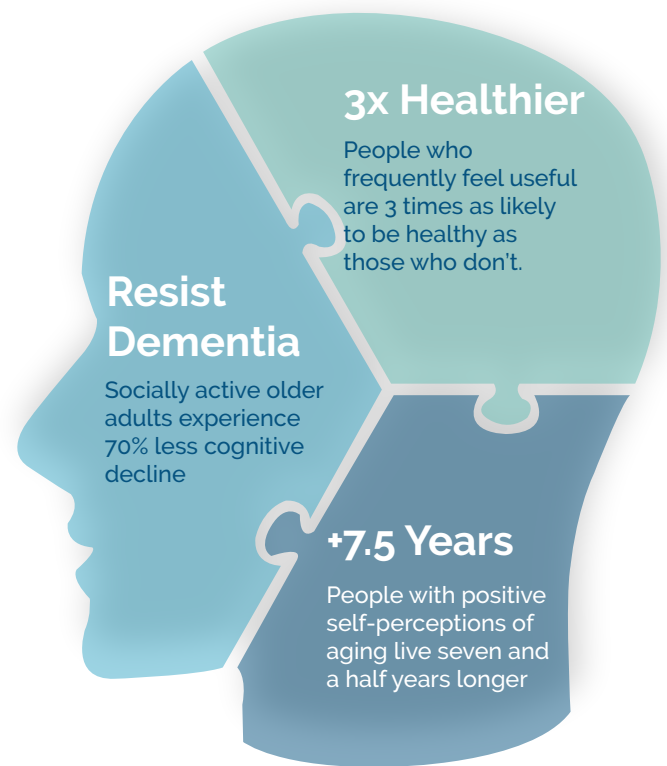
### *Scale Measuring Purpose in Life:*

1. I feel good when I think of what I've done in the past and what I hope to do in the future.
2. I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future.
3. I tend to focus on the present, because the future nearly always brings me problems.
4. I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.
5. My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me.
6. I used to set goals for myself, but that now seems like a waste of time.
7. I enjoy making plans for the future and working them to a reality.
8. I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself.
9. Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.
10. I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.

*Based on Ryff and Keyes' Scale of Psychological Well-Being<sup>36</sup>*

## Social Activity and Cognition

In the United States, approximately 14% of individuals over 71 suffer from dementia, and 11% of those over 65 have Alzheimer's disease.<sup>8</sup> Because cognitive declines in older adults are associated with dementia and Alzheimer's disease and are linked to lower quality of life and a lack of functional independence, it is important to prioritize methods to prevent or delay their onset. Research indicates that older adults who engage in social activities are less likely to experience such cognitive declines, and they therefore experience more positive health outcomes. A 2011 study in the U.S. found that older adults who were socially active (see box) experienced an average of 70% less cognitive decline across five domains (episodic memory, semantic memory, working memory, perceptual speed, and visuospatial ability).<sup>9</sup> The most socially active adults were found to experience the least amount of decline. This study adds to a growing body of literature which suggests that older adults who engage in social activities are less likely to experience cognitive declines.<sup>10</sup>



## Retaining Control and Autonomy

As adults transition to older adulthood, they often experience a self-perception of loss of competence and personal responsibility. Studies have shown that without control over one's life course, psychological stress and anxiety tend to increase. On the other hand, older adults with the self-perception of responsibility and decision-making in their lives experience greater levels of alertness, active participation, and a general sense of well-being than those with less personal responsibility. This suggests that a sense of autonomy and control in older adults contributes to positive health outcomes, regardless of their environment and circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

In 1976, a study was conducted on 91 participants aged 65-90 in a highly-ranked nursing home in the U.S. The randomly assigned experimental group was given responsibility over their environment and activities, including what movies to see and when, how their rooms were arranged, and how to issue complaints against staff. They were also allowed to visit their neighbors at their leisure and were each given a plant to care for. Members of the control group, still enjoying the same amenities the home offered, were not given choices in how or when their activities were performed, and their rooms and plants were tended by staff. Self-reports and reports from the nursing staff found that 71% of the control group were more debilitated at the end of the three-week trial, while 93% of the experimental group improved on scales of

### *Definition of Socially Active:*

Frequency of social activity was assessed using a previously established scale<sup>37</sup> that asks how often during the past year participants engaged in six common types of activities that involve social interaction:

- go to restaurants, sporting events or teletrack [offtrack betting], or play bingo;
- go on day trips or overnight trips;
- do unpaid community or volunteer work;
- visit relatives' or friends' houses;
- participate in groups, such as a senior center, Knights of Columbus, Rosary Society, or something similar; and
- attend church or religious services. Participants rated how often they participated in each activity based on a five-point scale: (1) once a year or less; (2) several times a year; (3) several times a month; (4) several times a week; and (5) every day or almost every day.



alertness, activity, and well-being.<sup>12</sup> This study suggests that older adults who have responsibilities and feel a sense of control over their lives have better health outcomes.

## Challenging Stereotypes of Aging

In a 2002 study headed by Becca Levy and Martin Slade, researchers found that self-perceptions of aging were a greater predictor of longevity than gender, socioeconomic status, loneliness, or functional health. Their results indicated that participants with positive self-perceptions of aging lived an average of 7.5 years longer than those with negative self-perceptions. The implication is that the more positive the older adult's self-perception of aging, the greater the will to live.<sup>13</sup>

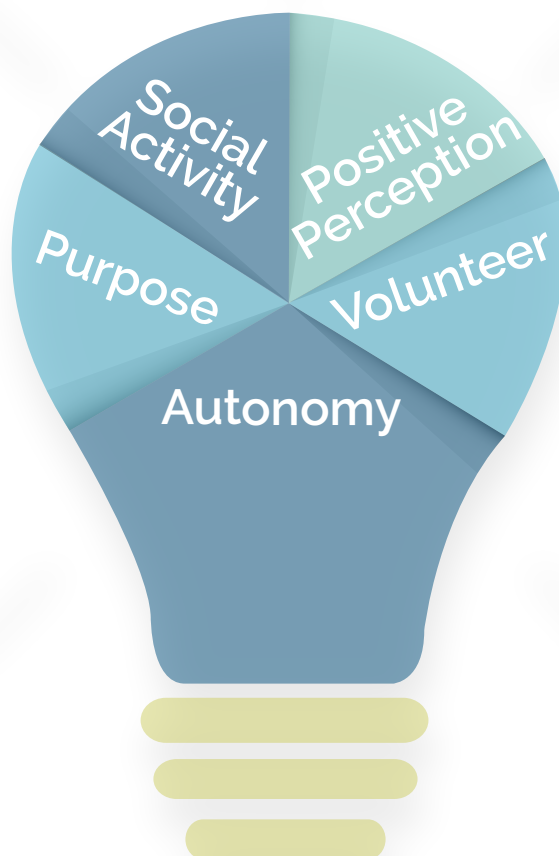
Negative stereotypes associated with aging can also be detrimental to healthy aging. Unlike factors influencing other stereotypes such as race and gender, people are not born old. We internalize societal stereotypes about older adults and their value, worth, and capabilities over time. Through the process of internalization and reinforcement, people typically have a negative stereotype attached to old age before they become older adults. By the time they reach older adulthood, they already hold a negative self-perception of what aging means. These stereotypes often become embedded without the individual's awareness. Because of this internalized and reinforced self-perception, some older people tend to feel as negatively about their own group as those outside their group do.<sup>14</sup>

Levy and Slade's research team likens the eradication of negative stereotypes of aging to stopping a virus that could take seven years off victims' lives; both require considerable efforts for research and the implementation of remedies.<sup>15</sup> Additional studies have found that negative self-perceptions of aging impact older adults' memory,<sup>16</sup> hearing,<sup>17</sup> and cardiovascular stress,<sup>18</sup> as well as their ability to recover from disabilities.<sup>19</sup> Given the immense power that self-perception has over one's aging process, it is important to redefine aging in a positive light and eradicate the negative stereotypes associated with aging. The recognition that negative stereotypes of aging affect physical health and may ultimately result in a shortened life span should encourage older adults to become aware of and examine their negative self-perceptions.

## Civic and Community Engagement

Historian Peter Laslett coined the term "third age" to refer to the period of life after retirement and the cessation of

caretaking for younger generations, but before the onset of disability.<sup>20</sup> This period occurs when parenting is done, people are no longer heavily relied on for production, and positive roles are not generally recognized.<sup>21</sup> However, as Baby Boomers enter older adulthood, they are rejecting the previous notions of old age being a period of frailty and disability. Consequently, the "third age" is undergoing a paradigm shift, where older adulthood is characterized by positive qualities such as personal growth and meaningful engagement.<sup>22</sup> Despite a decrease in the number of social roles typically available to older adults as they age, they continue to demonstrate a desire to remain useful by giving back to their communities.<sup>23</sup> Volunteering has been promoted as a preferred option for active aging by international organizations including the United Nations and the World Health Organization.<sup>24</sup> Studies have found that participation in high intensity programs such as Experience Corps, where older adults spend more than 15 hours a week working with children, can lead to significant physical improvements in previously inactive older adults.<sup>25</sup> Epidemiology suggests that volunteering is positively associated with lower mortality, improved well-being, and life satisfaction in older adults, and may decrease functional decline.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the health benefits derived from the physical activity involved in volunteering, there is also an altruism component, which evidence suggests leads to better physical and mental health in older adults.<sup>27</sup> To ensure more widespread participation of older adults in volunteerism, more and



differently framed opportunities must be created by and made available to them.

Recent research suggests volunteer opportunities that promote aging with a purpose not only offer solutions to problems associated with the aging processes, but can also have a positive effect on challenges in the greater society. As individuals move to older adulthood, we often experience a desire for generativity, the impulse to pass knowledge, skills, and experience on to future generations.<sup>28</sup> Older adults can utilize their insight and abilities to act as mentors, thereby helping others learn and develop. They can help other older adults age with dignity by providing valuable support as caregivers and volunteers. They can

*We recognize that the word “volunteer” may connote a class bias. Many people provide assistance in their families and communities voluntarily, but don’t consider it volunteerism. For the purpose of this paper, we define “volunteering” as freely offering help to others.*

bring experience, perspective, and emotional stability to the workplace.<sup>29</sup>

Some organizations have had success by working with older adults to recognize and utilize their own strengths to affect change in their communities. For example, United Neighborhood Houses is leading an emerging practice that empowers older adults to become change-makers within their neighborhoods. This practice involves promoting self-directed, purposeful, and meaningful engagement for older adults through civic action that addresses community needs and creates opportunities for greater community connection. UNH designed the Older Adults Strengthening Communities pilot project, which launched in 2014 in partnership with the New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA), to explore different approaches. Preliminary evaluation results of the pilot project indicate that older adults who participated in the program felt empowered, supported, and engaged. Additionally, the program had a positive impact on the way participants were viewed in their communities.<sup>30</sup> Given the wealth of positive contributions older adults can make in society, the aging population should be celebrated as an increasing natural resource.<sup>31</sup> Empowering older adults to contribute to society can aid in their successful, positive aging.

Researchers posit that productive engagement in older adults is a necessity, not a luxury.<sup>32</sup> It is important to shift social expectations away from the idea that aging is a

*Various companies and government programs have begun to change their approach to and engagement with older adults. Here are a few examples:*

- Recently retired employees from Intel are given a stipend and six months of health insurance to complete an internship with a local non-profit to smoothly transition from the private sector to the non-profit world.
- Senior Entrepreneurship Works assists individuals over 50 in starting new businesses through training and support programs.
- The 2009 Kennedy Serve America Act charges AmeriCorps with increasing the number of older participants and allows a transfer of educational awards earned by volunteers to their children and grandchildren.
- Federal and State policies are offering more flexibility in how Medicaid monies are spent, allowing older adults increased responsibility over their own health care decisions.
- Experience Corps places older adults in urban public schools to help teachers, resulting in positive health outcomes for older adults as well as improves educational outcomes for the students and relief for the teachers.

*from Increasing Productive Engagement<sup>38</sup>*

social problem. Older adults should be considered a valuable resource for families, communities, and society, which would result in positive outcomes on the individual, organizational, and societal levels. Older adults contribute \$100 billion worth of care to parents, spouses, and grandchildren and an additional \$44.3 million in formal volunteer work each year.<sup>33</sup> When older adults remain engaged with society, everyone wins.

It is essential to change the attitudes, expectations, and perspectives commonly associated with aging. As new policies and programs create new social roles for older people, attitudes on aging may adjust to accommodate them. Innovative solutions to expand across gender and racial lines will need to be explored. Attitudes and notions on aging must be addressed across the life course to ensure productive aging for all individuals.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

We know now there is more to aging than just the absence of disease or disability; we must also consider how attitudes and outlooks affect health and longevity among older adults. Research is revealing that many who are over 60 today want and need purpose and meaning in their lives. They seek fulfilling opportunities to apply their skills, talents, and interests in ways that are valued by society at large, contribute to the greater good, and ensure that everyone is a valued part of the fabric of their communities throughout their lives. Institutions working with older adults can incorporate innovative solutions that promote purpose and feelings of usefulness, participation in social activities, feelings of responsibility and autonomy, and positive self-perceptions around aging.





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