



Research Shows Attitude Really Does Make a Difference

As we get older, do we see ourselves as cranky or dignified? Forgetful or accomplished? Feeble or active? Recent research suggests our attitudes can affect how successfully we age. Dr. Dilip Jeste, a professor of psychiatry and neurosciences at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine, studied 500 participants between the ages of 60 and 98, who were asked to assess how successfully they have aged.

We typically assess how well we age based on physical health - whether or not we are sick or disabled. Jeste's research suggests a different measure: "People who think they are aging well are not necessarily the healthiest individuals. In fact, optimism and effective coping styles were found to be more important ... These findings suggest that physical health is not the best indicator of successful aging - attitude is."

Another study published in the *Journal of Psychology and Aging* conducted by the University of Texas found that people with a positive attitude showed fewer signs of frailty than those with a negative attitude. These researchers speculate that "...positive emotions may directly affect health by altering the chemical balance of the body."

But what if you can't find your rose-colored glasses or muster your inner Doris Day very often? Martin Seligman, the director of the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center, is a self-proclaimed pessimist. His book, *Authentic Happiness*, offers daily exercises to feel happier - even for those of us who tend to the cloudy side of the street. A March 2006 *AARP Bulletin* suggests starting with these three exercises to build your happiness foundation:

1. **The Three Blessings** Before going to bed, write down three things that went well during the day and why. The Positive Psychology Center found that people who did this exercise were less depressed and happier one month, three months, and six months later. Seligman says, "It seems to change memory, attention and the way you go through the day."

2. **The Gratitude Visit** Write a 300-word testimonial about someone who has touched your life. If possible, visit and read it to them. Seligman says, “Most people fall into each other’s arms and weep. It’s very cathartic ...Gratitude is most highly related to life satisfaction statistically, so it’s a good idea to do this exercise or some version of it.”

3. **Savor a Beautiful Day:** Take time out to indulge in your favorite activities. As you do, be completely aware of the joy it brings you. Whether you take an hour or a full day, remembering what gives you pleasure and making it a priority is a strong step toward growing your own happiness.

We don’t have to resign ourselves to the stereotype of growing old and grumpy. We can prescribe a new attitude for our mental health, just as we prescribe exercise or medication for our physical health. So go ahead and start thinking of yourself as dignified, accomplished and active. It will certainly enrich your days and maybe even add years to your life!

Resources

- For the latest studies on aging, visit the Alliance for Aging Research at www.agingresearch.org
- For a wealth of information about healthy aging, visit The U.S. Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/aging

Cathy Rosebaugh is a Certified Senior Advisor and Seniors Real Estate Specialist with Alterna Home Solutions. If you have questions about this article, please contact Cathy at 919-460-1061.

###