

Successful Aging: Physical, Psychological and Social Factors that Contribute to Aging Well

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What is successful aging?

The increase of human lifespans in the West and the aging American population has brought increased attention to what factors contribute to aging well. People are not only interested in longevity but how to remain in the best health in their later years. Successful aging can be defined in numerous ways. Is it simply living to an old age with no chronic physical ailments or does it encompass something more complex? The most widely used definition of aging, employed in the MacArthur Studies¹ is based on the objective measures used by researchers to assess freedom from chronic disease and disability, along with high physical and psychological functioning and social engagement. Therefore, we will review what physical, psychological and social attributes present in midlife researchers have identified that contribute to aging successfully.

Physical Factors

Unsurprisingly, a person's physical health before the age of 50 may be the greatest determinate to aging well. One study determined that the most predictive factor of aging well was the **absence of cigarette and alcohol abuse.**² Other

studies have also identified a lack of substance abuse as the greatest predictive factor of aging well.³ A **healthy Body Mass Index** (between 21 and 29) at the age of 50 is also a predictive factor of successful aging.² Moderate support has been found for **exercise** as a predictive factor for aging well, along with **better self-rated health**, and **fewer chronic medical conditions** (i.e. arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, etc.)³ While becoming sick with certain physical illnesses may be outside of our control, we do have considerable control over our weight, our level of exercise, and our abuse of cigarettes, alcohol, and recreational drugs.

Psychological Factors

Recently, there has been an increased interest in the connection between good psychological health and successful aging. Researchers have begun to focus on the role that mental health plays in predicting how well people age. Multiple studies have identified psychological factors as nearly as predictive of successful aging as physical health factors. **Low rates of depression** and **high rates of resilience** are now consistently identified as being as important as physical health in determining who will age successfully.^{2,3,4}

People that report lower rates of depression and higher rates of resilience are more likely to age well. Psychological resiliency is often defined as an individual's ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity. Resiliency is demonstrated within individuals who can effectively and relatively easily navigate their

¹ Berkman, LF, Seeman, TE, Albert, M, et al.: High usual and impaired functioning in community-dwelling older men and women: findings from the MacArthur Foundation Research on Successful Aging. *J Clin Epidemiol* 1993; 46: 1129-40.

² Vaillant, GE & Mukamal, K: Successful Aging. *Am J Psychiatry* 2001; 158: 839-47.

³ Depp, CA & Jeste, DV. Definitions and predictors of successful aging: A comprehensive review of larger quantitative studies. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2006; 6-20.

⁴ Jeste, DV, Savla, GN, Thompson, WK, et al. Association between older age and more successful aging: critical role of resilience and depression. *Am J Psychiatry*; *AiA*; 1-9.

way around crises and utilize effective methods of coping. Thus, a person with a high level of resiliency is more likely to have a positive outlook on life and see his or her life situation and health in a positive light.

In addition to resiliency, other psychological factors contribute to aging successfully. Research has also found that feeling that one has a **purpose in life** is an indicator for healthy aging for several reasons, including its potential for reducing mortality risk.^{5 6} People that have **mature (adaptive) defenses** from the age of 20-50 (e.g., humor, suppression, and anticipation) are also more likely to age well than those that utilize more immature defenses, like projection and dissociation.²

Overall, current research has found that those individuals who are psychologically healthy and resilient are more likely to age successfully than their peers. While genetic factors play a role in psychological health, there are therapeutic interventions that have been shown to be effective in managing depression. Psychotherapy and medication management can help build resiliency and decrease depressive symptoms.

Social Factors

While physical and psychological factors may be more indicative of aging well than social factors, there are several social variables that are often cited as helpful in contributing to aging successfully. The most cited social factor as a predictor of successful aging is a **happy**

marriage.^{2,6,7,8} This social factor has consistently been identified as a predictor of successful aging. Those with a **greater social support and more social contacts** are also more likely to age well.³

Another social factor that has been identified as a predictor of aging well is higher education.^{2,9} Those with **higher levels of education**, particularly college degrees, are more likely to age successfully. Education is often cited as a protective factor against psychological decline, but it could also be that people with higher education are more likely to have held well-paying jobs, thus allowing them greater access to resources like healthcare than their peers.

Midlife is a good time for people to assess the quality of their relationships. Putting the time and effort into developing a social support network may not only increase psychological health but long-term physical health.

Conclusions

It is important to take a holistic view of what contributes to aging successfully. Those that are most likely to age well have good physical and psychological health as well as a social support network. Successful aging is not only the absence of chronic illness, but the perceived life satisfaction of the elderly person. People with high levels of resilience, low rates of depression, few years of substance abuse, and a good social network are most likely to age successfully and, perhaps most importantly, report high levels of life satisfaction into their golden years.

⁵ Hill, PL & Turiano, NA. Purpose in life as a predictor of mortality across adulthood. *Psychological Science Online*, May 8, 2014, 1-5.

⁶ Pietrzakm RH, Tsai, J, Kirwin, PD, & Southwick, SM. Successful aging among older veterans in the United States. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 22:6, June 2014.

⁷ Pietrzak, R. & Cook, JM. Psychological resilience in older US Veterans: results from the national health and resilience in veterans study. *Depression and Anxiety*. 2013. 30: 432-43.

⁸ Meng, X & D'Arcy, C. Successful aging in Canada: prevalence and predictors from a population-based sample of older adults. *Gerontology*. 2014; 60(1) 65-72.

⁹ Yaffe, K Fioco, AJ, Lindquist, K, et al. Predictors of maintaining cognitive function in older adults. *The Health ABC Study*. 2009.