

LIFESTYLE FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY OF LIFE IN LATE ADULTHOOD by Eleanor Kurtus

Mid and late adulthood can be an exciting and active time of life, a renaissance. Somewhere around the age of fifty, a rebirth occurs followed by a “coalescence of all that has been lived and learned and a period of grace and generosity” (Sheehy, 1995, p.139). In her book *New Passages*, author Gail Sheehy writes that life after 45 is a stage of life radically altered from what previous generations have experienced. She calls it Second Adulthood, a time to open to new and more meaningful ways to be alive (Sheehy, 1995). Sheehy says

An American woman who today reaches age 50 free of cancer and heart disease can expect to see her 92nd birthday. The average man who is 65 today – an age now reached by more than 70 percent of the U.S. population – can expect to live until 81. This amounts to a second adult lifetime (pp. 5-6).

Not only is the health and longevity of the U.S. population continuously increasing, but the quality of life in these later years has also greatly improved over the last century (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996). Although there are many factors that affect quality of life, health, both mental and physical, is the cornerstone of a long, quality life. The National Institute on Aging (NIA) attributes the gains in health among older adults to health-related behavioral changes or lifestyle factors. The NIA found that disability among older Americans is decreasing at an accelerating pace:

Overall, from 1982 through 1999, the prevalence of disability among older Americans declined from 26.2 percent to 19.7 percent. A major feature of the decline was its acceleration from 1994 through 1999. (National Institute on Aging, 2001, para. 7)

Multiple research studies show that lifestyle factors have a profound impact on health during mid and late adulthood. Additionally, robust health cannot be taken for granted, but usually must be achieved with deliberate actions. Lifestyle factors have a greater impact than genetics, which account for about one third of the problems associated with aging (Johns Hopkins, 1998). According to the Johns Hopkins Medical Letter *Health After 50*, there are significant factors, which increase longevity, prevent or delay disabling illness, and improve the quality of life. They are:

- 1) **Exercise.** This by itself is the most important factor. Physical activity aids cardiovascular and respiratory functions, slows the loss of muscular strength, increases bone mass, aids digestion and bowel functions, promotes sound sleep, and prevents depression.
- 2) **Nutrition.** This area encompasses a healthy diet, use of supplements, and drinking plenty of water. The experts advocate a low fat diet with a minimum of 5 servings of fruits and vegetables, and 2 to 4 servings of low-

- fat dairy products each day. A multivitamin is recommended to fill in gaps from the diet, as well as 6 to 8 glasses of water or clear fluids to promote optimal organ function.
- 3) **Not smoking.** Cessation of smoking reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, some cancers, bronchitis, and emphysema.
 - 4) **Avoidance of excessive alcohol.** Limiting alcohol to one glass of wine or spirits per day reduces the risk of liver disease and certain cancers. However, the older you get, the more cautious you should be, even about drinking small amounts.
 - 5) **Stress reduction.** Reduction of stress and anxiety helps to strengthen the immune system and decreases susceptibility to disease.
 - 6) **Cultivating satisfying relationships.** Social interaction and support have been found to reduce stress, help cognitive functioning, and prevent depression.
 - 7) **Challenging the mind.** Learning new skills and regular mental activity promote healthy mental functioning.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) also states that healthy lifestyles are more influential than genetics to avoid the deterioration associated with aging (CDC, 2002). The CDC recommends that people be “physically active, eat a healthy diet, do not use tobacco, and practice other healthy behaviors” to reduce the risk of chronic diseases. They emphasize that “physical activity is the key to healthy aging.”

Since the benefits of a physically active lifestyle are so well documented and so important, a number of highly regarded health and aging organizations * have collaborated on a report entitled the *National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Aged 50 and Older* (CDC, 2001). The drive of the *National Blueprint* is to mobilize mid-life and older adults. It contains recommendations spanning the areas of Research, Home and Community, Workplace, Health Care Systems, and Policy Arena. It is a multi-pronged effort to make physical activity an integral and vital part of life.

From a psychological perspective, studies are showing that cognitive capacity “most often determines whether people can attain extreme old age while remaining active” (Volz, 2000). The good news is that research by psychologists at Princeton University demonstrated that new brain cells, which enable learning and memory, grow continuously throughout a person’s lifetime. Memory enhancement and mental functioning are supported by good diet, mental activity, and connectedness with other people. Again, these are all part of the Johns Hopkins recommendations and emphasize the importance of a healthy lifestyle.

How well are older Americans doing in regards to exercise? Two-thirds of Americans aged 50-79 are aware that it is the best thing they can do for their health and sixty percent say they are physically active on a regular basis (AARP, 2001, para. 1,7).

* Association for Advancement of Retired Persons (AARP), American College of Sports Medicine, American Geriatrics Society, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Nation Institute on Aging, and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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