

Holistic aging and well-being

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A consensus for an operational definition for ‘successful aging’ has yet to emerge. This is probably due to the fact that it means different things to many different people. Is successful aging a physiological construct optimal physical functioning? Is it a matter of well-being such as life satisfaction? Is it delineated by measures of social engagement such as voluntary work? Is it personal resources that provide resilience to life’s onslaught? Or maybe it is extrinsic factors such as sufficient personal finances. Lack of consistency for an operationalized definition of successful aging suggests it is best perceived as multidimensional concept that comprises a variety of components.^[2] With this in mind, taking a holistic approach to aging allows for the inclusiveness of the dynamics of physical, psychological, social, financial, environmental, educational, and spiritual areas of life.

Holistic philosophy encompasses the entirety of an interdependent system, recognizing that each facet and life phase has an effect upon the whole. Everything affects everything else; individual components do not function in isolation.^[7] Holistic aging emphasizes the functional relationships between the many parts of the whole. To support actively aging in place, a paradigm shift is needed in how the well-being of the elderly is understood and supported.^[3] A holistic approach to aging considers every aspect of a person’s life—not just the one body part that happens to be a point of distress or pain in a particular moment. We are more than individual body parts. Holism attempts to bring all of these aspects into balance. All the needs of a person cannot be fixed just by prescribing a pill. This alone will not help the person live a well-rounded, healthy and functional life. However, taking a holistic approach to aging can make the overall aging process more enjoyable and fulfilling. By examining and addressing each area as an integral piece of the whole, we further our understanding of what is truly being experienced and finding the best solutions for difficulties encountered throughout the aging process.

There are seven major areas to attend to for holistic aging and well-being. Education-wise you want to exercise or stretch your mind with a variety of activities such as word games, chess, geography, reading, writing, or taking an

informational class to learn about something new. Consider challenging your mind by learning a new language, how to play a musical instrument, study astronomy, or learn (relearn) basic math concepts. Reach a little beyond but don't overtax yourself or become hopelessly frustrated. It should be fun, challenging, spark inquisitiveness and inspire you. Learning should be a fundamental component of elderly health in addition to a means to changing people's perception of aging and increasing everyone's awareness of aging issues.^[13]

A holistic ecological view suggests humans and the environment as a single entity or system. As sentient beings, people are an interactive, integral aspect of the environment. Environment-wise is living in an eco-friendly community where you can spend time in nature, enjoying fresh air and sunshine. A majority of elderly prefer aging-in-place. This entails aging at home in the comfort and safety of family, friends, and community. A habitable outdoor setting is just as important as your indoor surroundings. No matter your age or where you live, we are not meant to be cooped up inside all the time. Whether it means sitting outside in the garden or courtyard, or taking a leisurely walk around and through the neighborhood, you should make every effort to get outdoors as often as possible.^[7]

Unattended environments can pose several restrictions. The aged are more apt to live with multiple chronic health conditions, often requiring home modifications and help with some elements of personal care and activities of daily living. It is important to remove those critical barriers that block the capacity for aging in a community setting.^[3] Moreover, the elderly are potentially more vulnerable to the negative effects of air pollution (both indoor and outdoor) on health and well-being. Environmental factors are important because epidemiologic evidence suggests an "association between air pollution and increased risk for chronic diseases, cognitive impairment, frailty, and decreased longevity".^[1]

Financial disposition contributes a great deal towards holistic health and well-being. A segmented society, with its focus on specialization, routinely view and treat different aspects of life, whether internal or external, as separate, disparate entities. We are socially indoctrinated and trained to think of each area of our lives as separate and distinct from the other areas of life. However financial health is a crucial part of overall personal well-being. Facets of aging and financial health include having savings and income to cover living expenses with additional funds for emergencies, hobbies, and enjoying life. Life insurance, long-term care

insurance and putting your affairs in order with a documented will and preplanned funeral preparations can remove some of the worry and stress, and mitigate the burden and sadness of loss your loved ones will experience upon your death. Whatever your precepts for financial health and aging, use a holistic way of thinking, make every effort to incorporate and integrate multiple layers of personal meaning and experience in an expansive way.

Physical health is an essential element of holistic well-being. Many older patients have complex care needs. Biological systems change with age; physiologies thought to be disparate are now understood to be connected.^[4] Maintenance of medical health and appropriate eating and exercise habits is part and parcel to practical self-care. Medical wise, attend to all the various practices known as required to keep you as physically healthy as possible. Medication wise, know your medicines what they are prescribed for, how much to take, when and how to take them. Be aware of the possible side effects and what to do when experiencing any unpleasant side effects. Nutrition wise, eat the freshest fruits and vegetables. Physical wise, exercise regularly and practice good sleep hygiene. Staying active during the day will help you sleep well at night. Finally, do not neglect your vision, hearing or oral health. Active aging promotes engagement, participation, dignity, self-fulfillment, self-determination, and support for older adults.^[3]

Psychological or mental health is a preeminent component of holistic well-being, undergirding thoughts and behavior. Psychological constituents include our mental ability, its veracity and our emotions that incorporate both our positive and negative life experiences. Mental perspicuity rests upon our cognitions (awareness, thoughts, reasoning, perceptions, and understanding). It is colored by our attitudes, beliefs, and emotions, which influence our behavior. Mental well-being and physical health are closely related in that a decline in one often presages a decline in the other. The natural progression of aging entails a generalized loss of the ultimate heights of previously achieved abilities. This is an unpleasant effect that will be experienced by all who age—no exclusions. The process of aging is problematic when it produces a prodigious disharmony between the desires of the mind and the capabilities of the body.^[5] This dissonance, if allowed to fester, can result in psychological problems such as anxiety and depression as well as contribute to the social problems of isolation and loneliness. Having the ability and the opportunity to talk about your feelings and concerns is a very important part of

practicing good mental health. Therapists and support groups can be invaluable resources, especially during times of loss or other duress.^[7] Adopting regular practices such as prayer, meditation, and mindfulness, can be very helpful for some. Others need to seek professional help from a psychotherapist.

Social components important to holistic well-being include culturally oriented social relationships, loosely and interchangeably described as social ties, social networks, social integration, social environment, and social support. Cultural variations in attitudes about aging cover a wide range of dispositions. Outlook, personality, moods and temperaments differ as do social setting and milieu. Personalized presentations of the aging self may appear as passive, self-restrained, avoidance, productive, individualist, collectivist, and other ways-of-being. Western culture's interpretation of aging overly focuses on attempting to fix your aging with a device, pill, lotion, or gimmick to achieve the superficial appearances of youth.

More recently, the concept of healthy aging, active aging, and successful aging has morphed into productive aging. Herein, the elderly person is expected to take an active approach in doing something with economic or tangible value for self or others.^[8] Retaining individualism, personal autonomy, youthfulness, conspicuous consumption, and busyness are values touted by Western society as the ideal standard. Eastern cultures are more likely to emphasize family and community life. Interdependence, collectivism, and familial reciprocity are especially central to East Asian moral values. From the variety of social backgrounds we can see that a holistic model of care for the elderly that incorporates the beliefs and practices from 'a body-spirit-social-environment perspective' is better able to offer insight to address the types of cultural care that promote best health and well-being, longevity, quality of life, and support end of life care.^[12]

Spirituality is an important aspect of life at all ages and stages in life. As you face the day-to-day challenges of aging, your spiritual beliefs, rituals, and transcendent engagements can have a positive impact on your overall holistic health and well-being. Spirituality can buffer the impact of negative life events. For many, aging often brings on fears of future frailty, personal loss, and fears of chronic illness such as arthritis, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, dementia, cancer, etc. For many, religion, spirituality, and enlightenment become especially relevant as one ages and considers the eventuality of all living organisms—death. Most aged

become more reflective as they assess their past and strive for insights into the meaning of life and how to make the most of their remaining years. This is especially so in the face of disease and death.

Although successful, productive, or active aging is frequently defined as the absence of disease and disability, many older adults consistently report perceiving themselves as aging successfully even in their present conditions of chronic illness and functional limitations.^[10] Many findings of this sort highlight the adoption of a more holistic way of looking at old age where transcendence assumes a major role as one of the criterion for successful aging. Spiritual insights and practices can be harnessed to synergistically promote health, longevity, quality of life, and support for end of life care.

Never underestimate the importance of transcendence in elderly resilience and well-being. Higher levels of spirituality correlate to lower anxiety and fear associated with aging, better mental and physical health and buffers the impact of negative life events.^[9] In the presence of chronic illness and functional limitations, practices of meditation, mindfulness, and experiences of transcendence offer a holistic way of acceptance, understanding and living well in the later years. The much used and co-adapted ‘Wheel of Wellness’ by Myers, Sweeney, and Witmer, (2000) hypothesize a model of health and well-being where spirituality resides at the center core, with major life tasks and subtasks to facilitate positive growth and change across the lifespan.^[11] Locke (2016) posits a slightly different ‘Wellness Wheel’ with mind-body-spirit at the center core axis and serving as a fulcrum.^[6]

In conclusion, the bottom line is to examine each area of your life to see where you can make improvements, education wise, environment wise, financial wise, physical wise, psychological wise, social wise, and spiritually wise. Nurture supportive social relationships with family and friends, challenge yourself to stay socially engaged. Cultivate and practice your spirituality. Exercise daily, eat nutritionally. As much as possible, heed Socrates’ notion of letting food be your medicine and medicine your food. In every area of your life, consider your options, explore possibilities and keep an open mind. Active aging is more than managing illness or care transitions; it requires a proactive, holistic individualized approach to health care.^[3] No matter how you personally define successful aging, you want to have some measure of balanced autonomy in each area. Holistic aging is a multidimensional, overlapping, interwoven, layered construct that consist of

bio-psycho-social, financial, environmental, educational, and spiritual paradigms.
Engage all your systems!

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