Aging is often associated with deeply ingrained beliefs of dependency, loneliness, and feelings of uselessness. As a result, people can view aging as something to fear and fight against, rather than a time of continued growth with new opportunities. Engaging in something meaningful and feeling your life matters are human needs we all share and these do not diminish as you age. A sustained sense of purpose is critical to your overall wellbeing.
Cultivating a Purpose-Filled Life

For decades your work or career filled your days with purpose, focus, activity, and a sense of worthiness. Consequently, the end of your career, or former role, can deeply threaten your sense of purpose. This sense of loss can take a toll on your health and wellbeing.

The difficult part may be trying to recreate a purpose-filled life in the face of societal norms telling you this is the time you should wind down, relax, and take it easy. These self-limiting beliefs around retirement and aging are simply not true. They limit your potential and the overall joy that can come with getting older.

The good news is that older adults understand themselves better than ever before and can focus on what really matters. This means the later chapters of your life can bring with it opportunities for meaningful pursuits and new aspirations.

The Impact of Purpose on Health

Recent research shows that older adults holding negative beliefs of aging have significantly more health issues than those who associate aging with increased wisdom and value. Researchers found that people who have a positive view of aging live, on average, longer than those who see aging in a negative light. Those holding more positive views of aging are also more likely to recover from major health setbacks.

Feeling your life has purpose offers a psychological buffer against the ups and downs of life. If you have a strong sense of purpose, you’re more likely to remain satisfied with life even while experiencing a difficult day. This kind of long-term resilience can lead to better cardiovascular health, less worry, and greater happiness over time.

In fact, people who are purposeful tend to be healthier overall. This may be because as you actively pursue goals and new opportunities, you are also engaging your brain and body in a whole host of behaviors that are known to be beneficial for health. These behaviors include being cognitively stimulated, socially involved and physically active.

Aging on Purpose

Your attitude toward aging is a significant factor in how you age. You control whether you view aging through a negative or positive lens. If you can view aging with a renewed sense of opportunity and possibility, then a purpose filled life awaits. Doing some “inner work” will help you uncover what inspires you at this time in your life.

The next step is to create an action plan. While this will require some work and patience, the process can be extremely satisfying. Begin by taking time to think about what really matters to you right now. Keep a notebook for a month or longer and record the activities or thoughts that foster positive feelings. Make notes on what stimulates your creativity or energizes you.

When you pay attention to what inspires you at this time in your life, you can begin to identify the specific activities that best match this renewed understanding of yourself. Then prioritize them into how you spend your time.
Maintaining personal connections as you age increases your sense of belonging and companionship. Feeling connected to something or someone other than yourself can offer meaning, hope and peace even during times of struggle or personal crisis. Having healthy relationships with others prevents loneliness and boosts your sense of well-being. Generosity toward others may lower your stress level and help you maintain good health. Stress can lead to chronic inflammation, which is a common link among many health issues. When you are feeling stressed, your immune function drops off, wounds heal more slowly and your blood pressure rises. Incorporating new ways of thinking about life can reduce your stress levels. Focus on cultivating a sense of gratitude into your daily routine to bring deeper meaning into your life. Identify what brings you joy and provides you with a sense of purpose. Then find opportunities to engage in these activities to make every day meaningful and improve your quality of life.

GOAL: Identify an activity that matches your interests and find a meaningful outlet for engaging in it.

Take Action Now

- Choose your attitude. Make the decision that you are going to take a positive view of growing older. Then act on it through participating in activities that provide you with meaning and purpose.

- Keep a journal. For a month or longer, record the activities and thoughts you have that foster positive feelings.

- Think outside yourself. Take the focus off yourself and your troubles. Share a skill or your time to care for someone else, help out a neighbor, or volunteer in your community.

- Leave a legacy. Pass along what you want to others to know about you or the significant memories you have, or the life lessons you’ve acquired. Express these in a letter, series of short stories, video, photo-journal, audio-recording or through art.

Expert Insight

Brent A. Bauer, M.D., Professor of Medicine and Director of the Mayo Clinic Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program, Rochester, Minnesota.

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Charter House

211 2nd Street NW
Rochester, MN 55901

507-266-8572

www.charterhouse-mayo.org

email: charterhouse@mayo.edu

Find us on facebook

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Dan Abraham Healthy Living Center

565 1st St SW
Rochester, MN 55901

507-266-4688

dahlc.mayoclinic.org

email: dahlc@mayo.edu

Find us on facebook