

Living a Longer, Richer Life

By Pam Bunyan, SignatureWOMEN® Client Advisory Board Member

Some time ago, an article in the Sunday paper featured a group of centenarians who had not only reached the age of 100 years or older, but who were also still physically active and mentally sharp. Identifying a common trait among these people should give us insight on how we might extend life, right? After all, who should know better than those who'd made it to that point?

A Common Theme

Although these people came from various walks of life and had vastly different life experiences, a common theme became apparent: The trait they shared was *the way they'd handled life's adversities*. Each had experienced unfortunate circumstances or personal tragedies of varying degrees during their lifetime; but they had rebounded—even stronger in a way—often taking on new purpose and passion as a result.

Advice from an Expert

There have been many studies on longevity since then, with results ranging from the medical and scientific to the entertaining. An example of the latter came from a spirited lady named Jesse Gallan, from Aberdeen, Scotland. Before passing away last year at the age of 109, she told interviewers that her secret to a long life was staying away from men! "They're just more trouble than they're worth," she said. As an aside, she added that she also got plenty of exercise and ate a warm bowl of porridge every morning.

We may chuckle that even at her age Jesse was still joking (or was she?) about staying away from men. However, she might have been onto something. Staying away from men may not be practical for everyone, but staying away from whatever causes stress is. We all experience stress; and, of course, much of it seems unavoidable. But it is how we handle that stress that can make a difference, how we rebound from adversity and find purpose and meaning in life.



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What About Good Genes?

Scientists now know that in spite of what we've always been told, genetics have little to do with how long we live. Genetics might determine *how good we look* while living that long, but not the length of time we look that way! In fact, genetics can count as little as 2% toward our longevity. The good news for us, then, is that we can actually influence our length and our quality of life.

Blue Zones

The human body has the ability to live to a healthy 90 years old; yet, on average in this country, we live to be only 78. There are areas of the world—pockets of societies—where the population lives much longer, where they reach age 100 up to 10 times greater than we do in the U.S. Leave it to someone like *National Geographic* to take a look into this. In 2004 brothers Dan and Tony Buettner teamed up with *National Geographic* and top longevity researchers to lead a project named “Blue Zones.” Their purpose was twofold: identify and study those pockets around the world where people live longer, and deploy learnings from the project research into practice.

Blue Zones is now an organization designed to help people adopt some of the best practices of the studies. As you might guess, these best practices are really nothing new. Back to Jesse—she said she got plenty of exercise, and that probably never included joining a gym or working out with a personal trainer. Not to discourage those activities, but we can do some of Jesse's exercises throughout the day: take stairs instead of elevators, walk or bike instead of drive, and lift multiple heavy baskets of laundry! Researchers observed that the type of exercise performed by people in the Blue Zones was not as significant as the fact that it was almost continuous (at least every 20 minutes) spontaneous movement throughout the day. This movement could be something as natural as walking to the garden or biking to a neighbor's house. There were no long sedentary periods (of, for example, sitting and watching a show on TV). Something to consider.

Our diet (I know, right?) is probably as important a factor as any. The praises of eating porridge (oatmeal) for breakfast each day have long been sung by the medical community, as well as by General Mills. Those studied in Blue Zones exist on a plant-based diet high in fiber, low in sugar and devoid of processed foods. Fish is also an important ingredient in their diet; and, when they do eat meat, it's in small portions. Probably no steak dinners.

It's Not All About Diet and Exercise

Besides these healthy-living factors observed in the Blue Zones, there is the social aspect; a supportive society is important for longevity. In these areas, as people get older they are more revered. They stay close to their extended family and enjoy social interaction with people of all ages.

Their faith, regardless of religious beliefs, is strong and plays a significant role in the lives of these people.

And the people in these societies take a break every day to reduce stress. It may be some form of meditation or prayer, or a less formal break such as just doing something enjoyable (picking up and playing a musical instrument, for example) for a little while during the day.

The Role of Resiliency

An educator named Al Siebert spent a career studying and coaching resiliency and its connection to longevity. He strongly believed that psychologically resilient adults age more slowly and live a longer life. Because they don't dwell on the downside of growing older and life in general, they are able to better cope with an aging body, as well as the loss of friends and loved ones.

This makes sense, since we know that stress affects the immune system and that managing stress is an important element of staying healthy. Having friends as a support system is significant in countering stress, and resilient people seek out and cultivate friends, forging relationships with others. They are more even-tempered, and are happy rather than hostile; they forgive instead of holding grudges, and are more playful than serious.

So How Does This Affect Us?

It's no secret that in our society today, older people are marginalized. There seems to be so much shame attached to aging. As our bodies begin to slow down, we tend to look at it as the nearing of the end. We see those wrinkles as something to hide, rather than the markings of wisdom. We are humiliated when we must have help with ordinary tasks, with personal care. We've all heard it said, "Old age is not for the faint of heart!"

What Can We Do?

Lest we lose heart in facing the aging process ourselves, why don't we make ours the generation that turns this thinking around? We are the lucky ones; we have the secret to a longer, richer life! We can start right now taking actions to influence not just the length of our lives but the quality as well.

It all starts within; we must make a commitment to live each day with purpose, embracing life and our age—whatever it is. When we live life the best that we can both physically and with a strong positive spirit, we can remain vibrant and admired, someone that others want to be around and emulate.

Then the adage that will come to mind is "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be!"

Sources

Blue Zones—Live Longer, Better, www.bluezones.com/about-blue-zones.

Lawrence Albert "Al" Siebert (January 21, 1934–June 25, 2009) was an American author and educator, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Siebert.

"Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made."
—Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra."

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