



Aging with Passion and Purpose

Finding Fulfillment, Creativity and Meaning

by Deborah Shouse

Want to age well? The answer isn't in your 401k. Self-acceptance, a positive attitude, creative expression, purposeful living and spiritual connections all anchor successful and meaningful aging. In fact, these kinds of preparations are just as important as saving money for retirement, according to Ron Pevny, director of the Center for Conscious Eldering, in Durango, Colorado, and author of *Conscious Living, Conscious Aging*.

Savor Self-Acceptance

While most people believe adulthood is the final stage of life, Dr. Bill Thomas is among the creative aging experts

that identify another life chapter: elderhood. "Elders possess novel ways of approaching time, money, faith and relationships," says Thomas, an Ithaca, New York geriatrician and fierce advocate for the value of aging.

"The best chapters may be near the end of the book," Thomas continues. "Once you appreciate yourself and your years, you can relinquish outdated expectations and seek to discover your true self. Then the world can open up to you," says Thomas. "Living a rewarding life means we are willing to say, 'These chapters now are the most interesting.'" During this time, rather than feeling consumed by what we have to do, we

can focus on what we want to do.

Fill the Funnel of Friends

For older people, relationships offer foundational connections; but as we age, friends may drift away, relocate or die. "Successful aging requires refilling our funnel of friends," says Thomas, who considers socially engaged elders with friends wealthier than a socially isolated millionaire.

"Notice opportunities for interacting and connecting," advises Shae Hadden, co-founder of The Eldering Institute in Vancouver, Canada. Talk with the checkout person at the grocery store or smile at a stranger walking her dog.

Cultivate a Positive Attitude

Our beliefs about aging shape our experiences. A Yale University study found that older individuals with more positive self-perceptions of aging lived 7.5 years longer than those less so inclined.

Connecting with positive role models helps us release limiting beliefs and embrace an attitude of gratitude instead. Other life lessons can be gleaned from observing how negativity affects people physically, emotionally, and socially.

Holding onto regrets traps us in the past zapping energy and self-worth; it also keeps the best in us from shining out says Pevny. He suggests a simple letting-go ceremony, with friends as witnesses. If possible, hold it in a natural outdoor setting.

At one of his conscious aging retreats, Pevny created a fire circle. Mike, 70, had been a dedicated long-distance runner for most of his life. Now plagued with mobility issues, Mike decided to let go of regrets. He brought a pair of running shorts into the circle and talked about what the sport had meant to him—its joys, challenges and camaraderie. Then he tossed the shorts into the fire, telling his friends, “I am letting go so I can find a new purpose and passion.”

Understand Our Life Stories

Creating our own life review helps us acknowledge and understand our most significant experiences and reminds us of all we’re bringing to our elder journey. Pevny offers these approaches:

- Develop a timeline, dividing life into seven-year sections. For each, write about the strongest memories and most influential people.
- Consider what matters most, from people and values to challenges and dreams.
- Write to children and grandchildren, sharing tales of our life’s most significant events and lessons.
- Record key stories on audio or video.

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Older people are our greatest resource. We need to nurture them and give them a chance to share what they know.

—SUSAN PERLSTEIN
FOUNDER, NATIONAL CENTER FOR
CREATIVE AGING AND
ELDERS SHARE THE ARTS

Explore the Arts

The changes that aging brings can mire elders in depression and isolation. “Older people need to be brave and resilient,” says Susan Perlstein, of Brooklyn, New York, founder emeritus of the National Center for Creative Aging, in Washington, D.C., and founder of Elders Share the Arts, in New York City. “To age creatively, we need a flow of varied experiences, exploring new activities or reframing longtime interests from a fresh perspective.”

Expressive arts can engage people’s minds, bodies and spirits. A George Washington University study shows that people engaged in the arts are happier and healthier. Perlstein understands this firsthand, having begun taking guitar lessons in her 70s. Motivated to play simple songs for her

new granddaughter, she subsequently learned to play jazz and blues tunes and joined a band.

“I’m doing something I love,” says Perlstein. “I’m meeting diverse people, learning new things and enjoying a rich life.”

Musician John Blegen, of Kansas City, Missouri, was 73 when he realized his lifelong secret desire to tap dance. When Blegen met the then 87-year-old Billie Mahoney, Kansas City’s “Queen of Tap,” he blurted out his wish and fear of being “too old.” She just laughed and urged him to sign up for her adult beginner class. He asked for tap shoes for Christmas and happily shuffle-stepped his way through three class sessions.

“Tap class inspired me, encouraged me and gave me hope,” he says. “Now I can shim sham and soft shoe. It’s a dream come true.”

- To unearth the inner artist, ask:
- Which senses do I most like to engage?
 - Do I enjoy looking at art or listening to music? Do I like sharing feelings and experiences? If so, a thrill may come from writing stories or plays, acting or storytelling.
 - As a child, what did I yearn to do; maybe play the piano, paint or engineer a train set? Now is the time to turn those dreams into reality.

■ How can I reframe my life in a positive way when I can no longer do activities I love? If dancing was my focus before, how do I rechannel that energy and passion? If puttering in the garden is too strenuous, what other outdoor interests can I pursue?

The answers can lead to fresh settings, including local community centers and places of worship. Many universities have extension classes for lifelong learners. State arts councils support programs, and museums and libraries host helpful activities. Shepherd Centers encourage community learning and Road Scholar caters to elders that prefer to travel and study.

Discover a Purpose

Upon retirement some people feel purposeless and lost. They yearn for

something that offers up excitement, energy and joy. Hadden invites people to be curious and explore options. “We’re designing our future around who we are and what we care about now,” she says.

Try keeping a journal for several weeks. Jot down issues and ideas that intrigue, aggravate and haunt. After several weeks, reflect on the links between concerns that compel and those that irritate. Perhaps we’re intrigued by a certain group of people or a compelling issue.

“A concern points to problems and people you want to help,” Hadden observes. This can range from lending a hand to struggling family members, maintaining our own health, volunteering for a literacy project or working to reduce world hunger. “Choose what inspires you to get out of bed each day, eager to move into action.”

Develop Inner Frontiers

People in their elder years may still be measured by midlife standards, which include physical power, productivity and achievement. “They come up short in the eyes of younger people,” dharma practitioner Kathleen Dowling Singh remarks. “But those standards do not define a human life.”

Rather, aging allows us to disengage from the pressures of appearances and accomplishments. As we release judgments and unwanted habits, we can increase our feelings of spirituality and peace. “When doors in the outer world seem to be closing, it’s time to cultivate inner resources that offer us joy and meaning. We have the beautiful privilege of slowing down and hearing what our heart is saying,” says Singh, of Sarasota, Florida.

Meditation is one way to deepen spiritually as we age. “Sit in solitude, gather your scattered thoughts and set an intention,” Singh suggests. “A daily practice shows what peace, silence and contentment feel like. As you become more comfortable, add time until you’re sitting for 20 to 40 minutes.”

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Nearly three-quarters of America’s adults believe they are lifelong learners. It helps them make new friends and community connections and prompts volunteerism

—PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Acknowledge Our Shelf Life

“We cannot speak about aging and awakening without speaking about death and dying,” Singh believes. “We need to confront our mortality.”

Meditating on the coming transition opens us up to the blessings of life. We can ask ourselves deep questions such as, “What am I doing? What do I want? What does this all mean? What is spirit?” Singh believes such searching questions are vital. None of us knows how much Earth time we have to awaken to a deeper, fuller experience of the sacred.

Help the World

In today’s world of chaos and crisis, the wisdom of elders is more important than ever. “Older people need to be engaged, using their insights to help the Earth, community and world,” Pevny says. Creative aging is about improving the future for subsequent generations.

In 2008, longtime educator Nora

Ellen Richard, 70, of Overland Park, Kansas, wanted to be of greater service. She asked herself, “What if I housed a foreign student?” and found the International Student Homestay Program. She embarked upon an exploration of cultures from around the world without leaving home.

Today, Richard has hosted more than a dozen female students and each relationship has expanded and enriched her life. “We talk about politics, food, religion and cultures; we even pray together,” Richard says. She points to memorable moments of bonding and respect, appreciation and celebration, and says, “As I’ve grown older, I’ve learned how vital it is to nurture the world I am in.”

Deborah Shouse is a writer, speaker, editor and dementia advocate. Her newest book is [Connecting in the Land of Dementia: Creative Activities to Explore Together](#). Connect at [DementiaJourney.org](#).

CREATIVE AGING RESOURCES

Center for Conscious Eldering
[CenterForConsciousEldering.com](#)

Changing Aging
[ChangingAging.org](#)

Dr. Bill Thomas
[DrBillThomas.org](#)

The Eldering Institute
[Eldering.org](#)

Elders Share the Arts
[Estanyc.org](#)

From Aging to Sageing
[Sage-ing.org](#)

Kathleen Dowling Singh
[KathleenDowlingSingh.com](#)

National Center for Creative Aging
[CreativeAging.org](#)

Shepherd’s Centers of America
[ShepherdCenters.org](#)