

# SUCCESSFUL AGING

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*The elderly and their families know well that the golden years are tarnished by pain, ill health, and disability. Several years have been added to the last part of life during the last century. The longevity of 85 year old men has increased by over 20%. However, an important question has been, "Are these 'good years' and for whom?"*

Thus begins a study by *Vaillant* and *Mukamal* on successful aging. These researchers conceptualize aging as a life stage with three dimensions: decline, neutral change, and development. Contrary to accepted beliefs, these researchers note there can be positive changes in personality as aging occurs and these positive changes in tolerance and ability to appreciate different points of view result in successful aging. Factors such as these positive changes contribute to successful adjustment during aging and a continued high quality of life.

Successful aging is defined by freedom from physical and cognitive decline, but uncontrollable variables sometimes influence the aging process. Just as maintenance of physical capacity requires exercise to ensure strength, flexibility and endurance, maintenance of cognitive capacity also requires exercise. Some researchers have reported that, even after a diagnosis of dementia is made, cognitive stimulation therapy can help maintain and, in some cases, improve thinking, memory and problem solving skills.

Here's a summary of what we know so far; *Knapp* and other researchers found cognitive stimulation therapy twice a week for 8 weeks improved, not only cognition, but quality of life also according to their participants, all of whom had a diagnosis of dementia. Their participants also experienced a reduction of depression. *Breuil* and others improved the cognitive performance of a group of participants in 10 sessions over 5 weeks. *Spector* and other researchers found cognitive stimulation therapy to offer improved thinking and quality of life in their participants.

We can extrapolate from these studies that successful aging may need to include cognitive stimulation tasks in order to keep the brain functioning as well as possible. Cognitive stimulation training tasks include:

- Word games, such as Sudoku, Scrabble, crossword puzzles, word jumbles, etc.,
- Regular review of current events, including famous faces, such as daily newspaper reading and periodical reading,

- Calculation skills, such as paying bills, balancing the checkbook, making change, etc.,
- Board games that include strategy skills, such as Checkers, Chess, Sorry, Monopoly, or that include memory skills such as Concentration etc.,
- Card games,
- Learning any new skill.

**It should be noted that watching television is a passive activity and is not likely to improve cognitive function.** Obtaining news on a regular basis from reading versus watching television is more likely to help maintain cognition.

Many of the above skills are activities that occur in day to day living, such as reading and calculating. The lesson to remember is if you feel you are unable to do these tasks independently, have a helper supervise or check your work as opposed to completely turning the task over to another. The more involved you are in the process, the more your brain is engaged and that mental activity will help maintain your cognition. The rule use it or lose it has definite application here. You cannot sit and watch to get a benefit to your thinking power, you must be actively engaged in the process. Your participation can take many forms, however, for example, if reading is very difficult for you because of visual problems, try listening to books on tape. You still need to keep track of the story and even if you are not physically reading, you will benefit cognitively from the process of listening to the text and following the story line.

As people age a common complaint is the inability to remember as well as when we were younger. As these cognitive stimulation programs indicate, memory is also subject to improvement if you exercise your memory. Board games and card games specifically will help in this area. But some strategies can be employed as memory "aids" as well. Here are some suggestions:

- Keep a master calendar on which you record all appointment times and activity times. This calendar may also incorporate household maintenance tasks, or errands to be completed that day. Household maintenance may include items such as cleaning or changing furnace filters, changing dehumidifier water, appliance maintenance.
- If you prefer a to do list may be made for each day separate from the master calendar. This list would include only the tasks you expect to accomplish in the day. Large projects, such as painting, would be recorded over several days.
- It is helpful to review the next day's calendar or to do list the night before to adjust it or just prepare for the day.

In summary, the rule for successful aging is to keep your cognitive abilities at their maximum. But to do that, you cannot sit passively by, you must be actively engaged in the process. Remember, what you don't use you may lose.

