

# SUCCESSFUL AGING IN THE ELDERLY

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## BACKGROUND

The 2011 South African Census revealed that 1 in every 20 people of the population is aged over 65<sup>1</sup>. However, living a long life is not enough. The quality of that life is becoming increasingly important, which has prompted interest in the area of successful aging.

Successful aging refers to the ability to age well. This encompasses good physical and mental functioning, life satisfaction, social functioning and social support. Successful aging has been associated with a positive psychological stance in later years, as well as general well-being and happiness<sup>2</sup>. Elderly individuals are generally subjected to limited resources, yet many are still able to age successfully. People who are able to adapt successfully to adversity are usually regarded as resilient. Cultivating and strengthening resilience can play an important role in assisting the elderly to cope with difficulties they may encounter and increase their happiness.

The UNISA Institute for Social and Health Sciences and its partner, the MRC Safety and Peace Promotion Research Unit, conducted a photo documentary on successful aging in five communities in Johannesburg and Cape Town. The photo documentary is located within a larger safety, peace and health promotion programme, the Ukuphepha Initiative: Demonstrating African Safety. Through visual research methodology, the project seeks to use portraits of local people and their stories to explore and promote successful aging. The photo documentary represents an innovative approach to eliciting narratives of successful aging. In addition, the use of visual research methodology contributes to the development of unique historical, contextual and artistic evidence on the subject of successful aging.

A total of 32 men and women between the ages of 58 and 92 participated in the project. Each participant was interviewed at her/his home by a community field-worker. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the participants' experiences of successful aging. Following the interviews, photographs were taken of each participant in her/his home setting. The interviews were transcribed and analysed by means of thematic content analysis. All the ethical issues in visual research were addressed.

The following main themes emerged from the participants' narratives: 1) **Being Industrious**; 2) **Caring**; 3) **Having a Social Network**; and 4) **Living a Healthy Lifestyle**. This information sheet also provides recommendations on successful aging.

## BEING INDUSTRIOUS



*"The reason I am still alive is that I keep myself busy. I sell chickens and play with my kids."*

**Stokfele Rhayo (78), Nomzamo**

Many of the elderly interviewed believed that being industrious contributed positively to their aging. They engaged in a number of activities, including working, volunteering, hobbies such as gardening, or generally keeping busy, in order to occupy their minds and bodies. The three most popular ways of being industrious were practising gardening and other hobbies, keeping busy and generating an income.

### *...bring beauty into your life...*

- Start a gardening patch. It can be very fulfilling to see the plants grow in your garden. Displaying your own flowers in your home or garden brings beauty into your life. The vegetables that you harvest from your garden can be used to feed your family. If your vegetable patch thrives, you may also be able to share your produce with your neighbours and even sell it to generate an income.
- Form a hobby group with other people in your community. Hobbies such as knitting, sewing, book clubs, playing a musical instrument or even starting a band can be very stimulating and increase your social circle.
- Keep young by keeping busy. Remain active by taking care of yourself and your home. Take pleasure in doing your own chores, housekeeping, laundry and odd-jobs around the home.

## CARING



*"[My grandchildren] are staying with their parents; they just come and visit sometimes. Always when my grandchildren are here, I play with them traditional games like 'kgati' and 'diketo' in order to boost my health. I can speak English and also tell jokes and play fun games with them. I teach them to respect elderly people when they visit me. I tell them that respect and good behaviour makes other people love you and you will live long on earth."*

**Jeaneth Ngozwane (73), Eldorado Park**

The participants emphasised the importance of taking care of themselves as a key aspect to aging successfully. Self-care, including being able to feed and clothe oneself, as well as maintaining a healthy level of personal hygiene is essential for physical and mental health in the elderly<sup>3</sup>. Participants also expressed a desire to take care of others, especially their grandchildren, and to impart their wisdom to younger generations by playing traditional games, singing spiritual songs and talking to them about values.

### *...share your stories...*

- Remember that as an older person you have a lot to offer your community and the youth. Share your stories, wisdom and expertise with others.
- Take care of yourself. If you are struggling to take care of yourself properly, do not hesitate to ask someone to help you.

### Did you know?

*Generativity* refers to a stage in life that begins in middle adulthood and continues into later life when individuals feel responsible for improving the world and aim to leave behind a legacy for future generations. Elderly persons develop the desire to contribute to something lasting and valuable for themselves and future generations<sup>4</sup>.



## HAVING A SOCIAL NETWORK



*“When there is Mouloud (Islamic religious celebration commemorating the birth of Prophet Mohammed PBUH), then we all help, I help with the flour [to make cake] and the sugar and make tea because we belong to the community organisation and it is something good.”*

*Juwaira Fanie (92), Broadlands Park*

Social networks play an important role in the elderly’s physical and psychological well-being. Being socially active and close to others was very important to the participants. Social activities included spending time with their family and friends, as well as being involved in community organisations and religious congregations. Studies have shown that social networks can serve as a protective buffer against stress in the elderly<sup>5</sup>. Elderly people are therefore encouraged to seek out and stay actively involved in positive social relationships and community activities.

### ...enrich your life...

- Stay connected with your loved ones by spending time with them on a regular basis.
- Participate in social activities in your community. By engaging in activities where you interact with and help others, you not only enrich your own life, but also the lives of others. Community activities may include volunteering, joining a social or interest club, attending community meetings, and participating in community campaigns.
- Faith and spirituality can be a source of comfort and strength during difficult times. By being part of a religious congregation you can receive social support, as well as pastoral care and counselling, which will help you to deal with the challenges that you face.



### Did you know?

- A diet that is high in mono-unsaturated dietary lipids, legumes, non-refined cereals, as well as fruits and vegetables have been found to be associated with longevity in the elderly<sup>6</sup>.
- Smoking is a risk factor in the development of cardiovascular disease, stroke and some forms of cancer. The benefits of smoking cessation are almost immediate for older individuals<sup>7</sup>.

## LIVING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE



*“I was involved in boxing training, did weight-lifting and also did training in karate. To keep myself fit, I am involved in vegetable gardening and I wake up every day at 5am and do the walking in my yard until 7am.”*

*James Khoza (79), Slovo Park*

The elderly men and women interviewed highlighted the benefits of living a healthy lifestyle. Living a healthy lifestyle includes partaking in physical activity, eating a healthy diet, and avoiding substances that may cause harm, such as alcohol, cigarettes and drugs. Participants found innovative and cost-effective ways of living healthily, including walking, and eating fruit and vegetables that they grow in their gardens.

### ...nutritious and balanced...

- Stay physically active by taking regular walks, gardening and doing household chores.
- Maintain a nutritious and balanced diet that includes plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Avoid harmful substances such as alcohol, cigarettes and drugs.

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