



Well-Being in Later Life

Many people think of later life as a time of increasing complaints and decreasing abilities. It may seem that later life is a time to dread. But there is another side to the story.

Some things actually get better in later life. For example, many retired people enjoy the freedom of not being tied to a job. Many people find that they have increased control in their lives. Some find that they have more time for valued relationships. The elderly of America are less likely to be poor today than they have ever been before. There are many advantages to later life. As Cherlin observes, this is "the first generation of elderly Americans in which most persons have the opportunity for a reasonably long, healthy, comfortable, independent life" (1999, p. 466).

Many people learn to compensate for losses. When we are older we may find it difficult to remember all seven things we were going to get at the grocery store. But we can learn to make lists. We can learn to keep our keys in a specific place. We can organize our lives to compensate for the losses we experience.

Some things that are lost don't matter so much. For example, when we are older, we cannot work math problems as quickly as when we were younger. Due to such losses, the elderly are often seen as less smart. The fact is that working math problems quickly is not essential to a happy, productive, later life. In later life we may not remember names and facts as readily, but many of the things that make life good - close relationships, freedom over our own lives, and a feeling of purpose - may actually be better in late life.

There are many new opportunities in later life. The golden years provide unique opportunities to explore hobbies, to take classes, to volunteer in the community, and to visit family and friends. Another opportunity is to review one's life and make sense of it all. We can catalog the things we have done. We can celebrate our successes. We can learn from our failures. And we can create our own statement of meaning.

For example, some people create scrapbooks and photo albums. Some create a photo gallery in their home. Some begin writing poems or songs. Later life provides a unique opportunity to take a long view of life and its meaning. We can celebrate and enjoy that meaning.

We can make choices. We can rebuild neglected relationships. We can read books and listen to music that inspire us. We can focus our energy on a long-forgotten hobby. Late life may not be a good time to take up pole vaulting but it is a great time to relax, enjoy life, and finalize the message we will leave to future generations.

Applications:

A scholar of well-being in later life, Carol Ryff, has defined six areas of well-being. Consider how well you are doing in each area:

1. Autonomy (regulates behavior from within and evaluates self by personal standards)
2. Environmental mastery (able to choose or modify situations according to personal needs and values)
3. Personal growth (continued development and learning)
4. Positive relations with others (warm, satisfying relationships, concerned with others)
5. Purpose in life (goals and direction and meaning)
6. Self-acceptance (accepts good and bad about self)

Notice your areas of strength. How are those areas making your life good?

Notice any areas where you are not doing as well as you would like. What can you do to improve your well-being in that area? If you are not sure how to make your life better in that area, discuss it with someone who is wise and helpful.

What are some ways you continue to contribute to the world around you? Do you volunteer at a school or at your church? Do you help your family? Do you beautify your yard? Find a way to contribute that is personally meaningful.

What are some ways that you are developing a statement of the meaning of your life? Poetry? Music? Photo album? A quiet garden? Writing? Autobiography?

References:

Andrew J. Cherlin (1999). *Public and private families*. Boston: McGraw-Hill College.

Carol Ryff (1989). *Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1069-1081.