

Voices from around the world: How to age vibrantly

By Julie Lancaster, M.Ed.



When it comes to aging well and living a productive life, most of us would say we already know what to do: Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, exercise every day, don't smoke or drink (too much) and avoid stress.

Yet, the famous actress Bette Davis said, and many people agree with her, "old age isn't for sissies." So, is aging well really that easy or that hard?

Many people are concerned about achy joints, thinning hair, age spots, waning balance, slower learning, less motivation, decreased memory, etc. As management consultant and leadership development coach, I am often asked to talk about the importance of self-care and how to maintain the habits necessary to be happy and well.

I recently took a two-week trip to Vietnam where I toured the country on a bicycle. I was the youngest person in the group of primarily 60-plus-year-olds. Yet, this group of pedalers were the most-active, full-of-life, joyful group of "older people" I have had the pleasure to be with.

To understand what made them so vivacious and what I needed to learn to share with my clients, I did a few short interviews. My goal was to learn from them the secret of aging vibrantly. Here is what they told me:

- Quyen: Measuring only 4'11", 47-year-old Quyen can only be described as "happy-go-lucky." As a Vietnamese biking tour guide, he has brought joy to hundreds of bicyclists from all around the world.

His advice: “The secret is to choose to always be happy, regardless of the circumstances.” Quyen also focused on the spiritual side of life as well, embracing Buddhism and Confucianism.

- Jane: A graceful 68-year-old woman from British Columbia, Jane was the owner of a well-respected day spa. Her advice: “It’s important to be clear on your values, be active every day, make the effort to have friendships, find a way to serve others and always find the good in every situation, then sprinkle your life with gratitude.”
- Nancy: At age 73, Nancy was the oldest woman in the group. Her advice: “The key is to listen to your body; take care of it by paying attention to what it needs. And be active!” Every morning, Nancy does her 15-minute ‘cup of yoga’ and she says having younger friends is a must, to stay active and young.
- Debbie: A lively 60-year-old Las Vegas resident, Debbie has established a franchise of 200 bakeries. Her advice is to embrace the ‘yes philosophy’ in life. “Keep saying yes to new opportunities and learning, to making new friends, and to serving and appreciating others.”
- Joyce: A very passionate 60-year-old nurse, Joyce loves to travel. Her advice: “It is important to always have something to look forward to, such as going on trips to new places and meeting people who have the same desire for adventure that you do.”
- Lenny: A former rugby player from Canada, 68-year-old Lenny has lived on three continents. He believes in the importance of recognizing the needs of others before they ask for help, which benefits him and others. His advice: “My one simple rule or word of advice: don’t watch TV.”

The secret of aging well, really isn’t a secret. Aging vibrantly doesn’t require a scientific formula or rigorous study. Aging well “just” requires consistency, motivation, energy and good habits. And, a few other important concepts I took from my biking buddies to keep us living well: be active, serve others, have a positive perspective, travel, connect with others and laugh.

Which brings me to my final thought. While in Vietnam I was introduced to laughing yoga. In Hanoi, a group of approximately 50 people gather together at 6 a.m. to engage in a physical and mental workout called laughing yoga. Why? According to laughter researchers, laughter is good for the heart and mind, improves the mood, relaxes muscles and it is fun!

During laughing yoga, it starts out as contrived laughter and scripted motions, but by the end, everyone is authentically in a full guffaw. As with much exercise, it takes discipline, but there is much payoff.

Perhaps we all need to add laughter to our list of aging-well habits.

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