

Foundations of Successful Aging: a case study and implications for social workers

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Successful, healthy aging takes many individual forms. In their book, Successful Aging, Rowe and Kahn (1998) define successful aging as “the ability to maintain three key behaviors or characteristics: (1) low risk of disease and disease related disability, (2) high mental and physical function, and (3) active engagement with life” (p. 38). While this definition is not comprehensive, omitting factors such as spirituality and money that are instrumental to the successful aging of many, it is helpful in that it is broad enough to include room for significant individual variation.

The presence and importance of specific factors associated with healthy aging may vary among individuals. However, certain commonalities do exist among those who embody successful aging. For example, avoiding premature death and disease are inexorable components of any definition of healthy aging, as well as basic characteristics of each individual who we would include in the successful aging category.

Research seeks to identify common factors among individuals who embody successful aging. It is an undeniable fact that research has given us many important clues to specific factors associated with successful aging. Research seeks to generalize results for populations by looking for common factors among individuals. As an unfortunate result of this focus on generalizable data, individual differences often become overlooked. From a clinical perspective, this research focus can be discouraging to the individual in that identified contributory factors to healthy aging that are more static, such as genetic make-up, family history, or education may be viewed by the individual as reasons for not instituting more modifiable factors, such as lifestyle changes, that may also contribute to healthy aging.

It is an interesting fact of most research, and a fascinating commentary on our society in general, that we as both researchers and laypeople seeking answers to questions such as “How can I age successfully?” rarely seek to actually *listen* to those who embody the answers. Using the scientific method and various research methodologies for assessing what might be the keys to successful aging, the human element of listening to firsthand accounts of those who are actually living the term is often left out of the equation.

As an aspiring social worker, I feel that it is vitally important to develop these skills of listening. It is only through listening to clients and synthesizing information from personal accounts and research

literature findings that social workers are able to individualize recommendations to maximize the qualities of their clients' lives.

In an effort to learn more about successful aging and improve upon my own skills of listening, I interviewed Mr. X. Mr. X is an "84 years young," Caucasian widower who lives alone in a condominium complex in Seattle. He describes himself as somewhat private and quiet, but has much to say by the example that he provides of healthy aging. As he chose to do, I will begin in the chronological beginning.

Before I begin to describe my conversation with Mr. X, it is important to me that I acknowledge one unfortunate artifact of much academic writing: the individual often becomes objectified. It is my hope in this paper to capture the human aspect of successful aging, using Mr. X's firsthand account as an example to highlight research literature. It is my sincere wish that this unintended potential consequence of academia is not realized within the body of my writing.

#### Childhood and Education

Mr. X was born in New York, but spent the majority of his childhood in Southern California. He was the first chair cello in his high school orchestra, and went on to study engineering at UCLA for two years. At this point, circumstances forced him to leave school and work. He became a shipping clerk, and was consequently introduced to accounting and bookkeeping by a shipping clerk boss who saw that he had underutilized potential. He later returned to UCLA, and received a degree in accounting that he later used to start his own accounting firm.

While Mr. X did not choose to talk about his childhood and schooling at length, the formal higher education that he received is most likely a factor in his successful aging. Education has been implicated in research studies as one factor that may contribute to healthy aging. Murrell and Meeks (2002) found that education was positively related to health measures among a cohort of individuals over age 55, concluding that "educational attainment is a good investment for successful aging" (p. 527).

In addition to the benefits of formal education, Mr. X also evinces a strong desire to learn. Going back to UCLA after time away to pursue a completely different degree is testimony to this desire and to his motivation to learn. This drive toward continued learning is not only evident in his early life, but also pervades many aspects of his life in older adulthood.

### Lifestyle, Activities, and Interests

Mr. X's lifestyle can be accurately described in a single word: active. Mr. X bicycles 12-14 miles each day. Refusing to be constrained by his environment, he also has a stationary bike that he rides during bad weather. In addition to this physical activity, Mr. X frequents the gym for a half hour, 5-6 days per week.

The benefits of exercise at all stages of life are widely cited in the medical literature. Exercise has positive mental and physical effects. In their study of exercise among the elderly, Brassington, Atienza, Perczck, DiLorenzo and King (2002) cited participation in regular physical activity as one of the most important behaviors associated with both chronic disease prevention and well-being promotion among the elderly. Regular exercise also helps combat depression. Thus, exercise may become even more important in older adulthood, as both chronic disease and depression are health problems that are increasingly common as age increases.

In addition to bike riding, Mr. X has many interests. He is a world traveler, and has mementos from many of his travels decorating his condo. He showed me a few of them, including a Moroccan lemonade set and a photograph of a Chinese sunset. He also indicated that he would like to continue his travels in the future.

Mr. X describes himself as a "frustrated sailor," explaining that he owned a sailboat when he lived in Southern California and has had trouble recreating those sailing experiences since he moved to Seattle. He also enjoys reading mystery and legal novels. Each of these interests fosters Mr. X's continued learning, and also provides avenues for the development of new social connections through such organizations as sailing and book clubs.

### Social Support and Connectedness

Social support and connectedness are evident in many areas of Mr. X's life. His family plays a huge role in his everyday life, and he acknowledged that their presence and support is greatly important to him. He has 2 children, a son in Northern California and a daughter in Seattle. He enjoys dinner with his daughter's family in Seattle at least once a week. He also runs a "chauffeur service" to and from various extracurricular activities for his grandchildren in Seattle, and sees them almost everyday as a result. He also visits his son and family in Northern California about every two months.

In addition to the support of his family, Mr. X also gains social support and a sense of connection through his involvement in the community. He regularly volunteers his time to transport gift baskets for Jewish Family Services. He also plays bridge three times a week at a local community center. Each of these activities speaks to Mr. X's "active engagement in life," previously cited by Rowe & Kahn as a key component in successful aging.

Both the benefits of social support and the negative consequences of a lack thereof have been researched in relation to aging. Supportive relationships are correlated with lower rates of illness, faster recovery, and higher levels of health care behavior. Social support has also been identified as an important predictor of cognitive functioning in older populations. Seeman, Lusignolo, Albert and Berkman (2001) explored the positive relationship between social support and cognitive aging in an elderly population. In this study, researchers found that participants receiving higher levels of emotional support over a 7.5-year period had better cognitive functioning.

#### Personality and Attitude

Humor and optimism both play important roles in Mr. X's life. Mr. X believes that his own positive outlook has given him the ability to take things in stride and laugh things off if they're bad. Mr. X tries to "be happy where he is." This mindset is exemplified in his words to me about his desire to be around people. He told me that likes people, but is also perfectly content to be by himself. In his own words, "I prefer to be around people, but I am not unhappy to be alone."

This positive attitude, sense of humor, and ability to adapt to a changing environment all contribute to Mr. X's successful aging. These factors directly protect Mr. X against mental health problems such as depression. In one possible schema, these personality and attitude factors also predispose Mr. X to other factors associated with successful aging. For instance, Mr. X's ability to take things in stride is probably associated with lower life stress levels. Because high chronic life stress is a risk factor for such health problems as heart disease, Mr. X's positive attitude may provide protective physical as well as mental health benefits as he ages.

#### Conclusion

It is clear from Mr. X's personal account that his own successful aging is the result of a combination of factors. Though each factor is the result of the interaction between an individual and his or

her environment, certain factors in Mr. X's life constitute more internal foundations for successful aging. His positive attitude and humor are two examples. Other factors constitute more external foundations, such as the social support of his family and community and his ability to drive. Both the internal and external foundations in Mr. X's life drive his desire and provide motivation for continuing such activities as exercising and volunteering in the community, which in turn also contribute to his successful aging. For example, his ability to drive makes volunteering in the community, transporting his grandkids to various extracurricular activities, and going for long bike rides very accessible to him. This, in turn, increases feelings of social support, productivity and engagement in the community, and also increases the likelihood that he will gain the physical and mental benefits of exercise.

Underlying much of what Mr. X disclosed to me are themes of continued learning and discovery, and a strong sense of self-efficacy in many realms of his life. He discovered his passion for biking in older adulthood, only beginning to bike on a regular basis only after his wife passed away in 1986. He also learned to use a computer just 3 months ago, and now thoroughly enjoys connecting to people through email.

Self-efficacy is an important contributor to successful aging, and relates to one's belief in the modifiability of his or her environment. The maintenance of this belief in older adults is an essential function of the social worker. Each social worker seeking to foster the successful aging of a client must possess within their clinical framework the belief that there are *always* modifiable factors in an individual's life that can lead to quality of life enhancement.

The ability of social workers to synthesize information from personal client accounts and research literature is important in order to individualize recommendations to clients about changes that can be made to maximize the quality of life and subsequent "successful aging" of the individual. Research gives us important clues into common factors of successful aging within populations. Social workers have the task of listening to clients and fitting the research correlates of successful aging into an individual picture, taking into account individual strengths and abilities and environmental factors. It is through *listening* to clients, rather than assuming to know what's best for an individual based on evidence in published literature that this is possible.

When I asked Mr. X directly about his definition of successful aging, he replied, “exercise and a positive attitude.” He emphasized that successful aging is a mental frame. Mr. X’s definition of successful aging encompasses both physical and mental aspects. And Mr. X himself, by living his own definition, truly embodies this holistic picture of successful aging.

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