

MID-LIFE PLANNING FOR AGING WELL

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CHAPTER 6

Mark Kunik is a native of Houston, Texas. He graduated from the The University of Texas (UT) at Austin and completed his medical training and a combined internship/residency in psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) and Baylor Affiliated Hospitals. He then spent a year as a Geriatric Psychiatry Fellow at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, before returning to Houston and Baylor College of Medicine to join the staff of Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. He earned a Masters of Public Health from The UT School of Public Health in 2000. Dr. Kunik joined the staff of Michael E. DeBakey VAMC 20 years ago and was the Director of Geriatric Psychiatry from 1992-1998. In 1999, he joined the Houston Health Service Research Center of Excellence and the South Central MIRECC, and since then his career has focused on research and research administration. For the past decade, he has been an Associate Director of both the South Central MIRECC and the Houston Health Service Research Center of Excellence. He was named Director of the South Central MIRECC in 2014. He has maintained consistent grant funding for the past 15 years, focusing on improving care for persons with dementia and their caregivers. Dr. Kunik is a hard-working team-player, generous mentor, and national research leader.

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10 SUGGESTIONS TO HELP YOU AGE SUCCESSFULLY

Suggestion:	Action Item:
1. Stop Smoking	Join a smoking-cessation class; speak to a healthcare provider to help you quit.
2. Drink in Moderation	Do not drink alcohol in excess. Join AA or speak to a healthcare provider or psychotherapist to help reduce or cease alcohol use if you are struggling with drinking. Men should not drink more than 2 alcohol units/day. Women should not consume more than 1 unit/ day.
3. Exercise	Engaging in regular exercise is a great way to control weight and improve physical health. The American Heart Association recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity at least 5 days per week for a total of 150 minutes per week or at least 25 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity 3 days per week for a total of 75 minutes. Moderate-to-high intensity muscle-strengthening activity at least 2 days per week for additional health benefits is also recommended.
4. Have a BMI between 21 and 29	A healthy body weight is essential for good physical health. A person with a BMI over 29 is considered obese. If you are struggling with your weight, speak to your healthcare provider for help losing weight.
5. Work at Being Resilient	If you struggle with resilience, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and psychotherapy have been shown to be effective in helping people cope and overcome challenges.
6. If You Are Depressed, Get Help	In 2012, according to the National Institutes of Health, an estimated 16 million adults aged 18 or older in the United States had at least 1 major depressive episode in the past year. This represented 6.9% of all U.S. adults. While some people are more prone to depression than others, there are treatments, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and antidepressants, that are effective in treating depression. If you are struggling with depression, speak to your doctor about ways to ameliorate and treat your symptoms.

7. Develop Mature Coping Skills	People that use mature coping skills, such as humor, impulse control, and anticipation, are more likely to age well than those that use more immature defenses, such as blaming and defensiveness. If you struggle with this, long-term psychodynamic therapy has been shown to be effective in helping people identify why they engage in unhealthy coping skills and in helping them develop more mature techniques.
8. Maintain a Happy Marriage	In 1960, 72% of all adults age 18 and older were married; today just 51% are. If current trends continue, the share of adults who are currently married will drop to below half within a few years. ¹ Yet research has shown us that happily married adults are more likely to be healthy both physically and psychologically than single adults or those unhappily married. Already married? If you are already married but feel that your marriage could use improvement, seek help from a family therapist. If you are single, make time to meet someone using dating services or by increasing your social engagements.
9. Increase Social Contacts	Those with a high degree of social support tend to be healthier overall than those without a network. Join a club, church/synagogue or interest group where you feel like you will meet people who share similar interests. Maintain contact with old friends and neighbors. It is worth the effort to maintain friendships.
10. Educate Yourself	Those with more education tend to live longer and healthier lives than those with little education. It is never too late for continuing education. Continuing education courses are a great way to keep your mind active and meet new people. Learning a second language is an excellent way to keep your mind healthy.

¹ Cohn D, Passel JS, Wang W, Livingston G. Barely half of US adults are married – a record low. Pew Research: Social and Demographic Trends. Dec. 14, 2011. Available at <http://media.al.com/bn/other/Marriage-report-Pew-Research-Center-Dec-2011.pdf>.

SUCCESSFUL AGING: PHYSICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO AGING WELL

The increase of human lifespans in the West and the aging American population has brought increased attention to factors that contribute to aging well. People are not only interested in longevity but also in how to remain in the best health in their later years. Successful aging can be defined in numerous ways. Is it simply living to an old age with no chronic physical ailments, or does it encompass something more complex? The most widely used definition of aging, employed in the MacArthur Studies,¹ is based on the objective measures used by researchers to assess freedom from chronic disease and disability, along with high physical and psychological functioning and social engagement. Researchers have identified physical, psychological, cognitive, and social attributes present in midlife that as contributing to aging successfully.

PHYSICAL FACTORS

Unsurprisingly, a person's physical health before the age of 50 may be the greatest determinate to aging well. While becoming sick with certain physical illnesses may be outside our control, we do have considerable control over our weight; our level of exercise; and our abuse of cigarettes, alcohol, and recreational drugs. One study determined that the most predictive factor of aging well was the **absence of cigarette and alcohol abuse**.² Other studies have also identified a lack of substance abuse as the greatest predictive factor of aging well.³ A **healthy body mass index** (between 21 and 29) at the age of 50 is also a predictive factor of successful aging.² Moderate support has been found for **exercise** as a predictive factor for aging well, along with **good self-rated health**, and **few chronic medical conditions** (e.g., arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, etc.)³

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Recently, there has been an increased interest in the connection between good psychological health and successful aging. Researchers have begun to focus on the role that mental health plays in predicting how well people age. Multiple studies have identified psychological factors as being nearly as predictive of successful aging as physical health factors. **Low rates of depression** and **high rates of resilience** are now consistently identified as being as important as physical health in determining who will age successfully.^{2,3,4}

People that report low rates of depression and high rates of resilience are more likely to age well than those who do otherwise. Psychological resiliency is often defined as an individual's ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity. Resiliency is demonstrated within individuals who can effectively and relatively easily navigate their way around crises and use effective methods of coping. Thus, a person with a high level of resiliency is more likely to have a positive outlook on life and see his or her life situation and health in a positive light.

In addition to resiliency, other psychological factors contribute to aging successfully. Research has also found that feeling that one has a **purpose in life** is an indicator for healthy aging for several reasons, including its potential for reducing mortality risk.^{5,6} People that have **mature (adaptive) defenses** from the age of 20-50 (e.g., humor and impulse control) are also more likely to age well than those who use more immature defenses, like blaming and defensiveness.²

Overall, current research has found that individuals who are psychologically healthy and resilient are more likely to age successfully than their peers. Although genetic factors play a role in psychological health, therapeutic interventions are effective in managing depression. Psychotherapy and medication management can help build resiliency and decrease depressive symptoms.

¹ Berkman, LF, Seeman, TE, Albert, M, et al. High usual and impaired functioning in community-dwelling older men and women: findings from the MacArthur Foundation Research on Successful Aging. *J Clin Epidemiol* 1993;46:1129-40.

² Vailiant, GE & Mukamal, K. Successful aging. *Am J Psychiatry* 2001; 158: 839-47.

³ Depp, CA & Jeste, DV. Definitions and predictors of successful aging: A comprehensive review of larger quantitative studies. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2006; 6-20.

⁴ Jeste, DV, Savla, GN, Thompson, WK, et al. Association between older age and more successful aging: critical role of resilience and depression. *Am J Psychiatry* 2013;170(2):188-96..

⁵ Hill PL, Turiano NA. Purpose in life as a predictor of mortality across adulthood. *Psychological Science Online* May 8, 2014;1-5.

⁶ Pietrzak RH, Tsai J, Kirwin PD, Southwick SM. Successful aging among older veterans in the United States. *Am J Geriatr Psychiatry* 2014;22(6):551-63.

COGNITIVE FACTORS

The American Heart Association recently published a study⁷ linking cognitive health to cardiac health. It found that, compared with people with low cardiovascular health, **people with intermediate and high cardiovascular health were associated with substantially lower incidence of cognitive impairment.** It also found that people with intermediate and high levels of cardiovascular health had similar incidence of cognitive impairment. This suggests that moderate physical activity in midlife not only has physical health benefits but also may help protect against the development of dementia and Alzheimer's disease in later life.

Researchers have also identified that people with **higher levels of education**, particularly college degrees, are more likely to age successfully.² To protect against cognitive decline, continuing education in midlife, such as learning a second language, may be helpful in memory and cognitive preservation in old age.

SOCIAL FACTORS

Although physical and psychological factors may be more indicative of aging well than social factors, several social variables are often cited as helpful. The most frequently cited social factor as a predictor of successful aging is **a happy marriage.**^{2,6,8,9} Those with a high degree of **social support and high number of social contacts** are also more likely to age well than those lacking these characteristics.³

Midlife is a good time for people to assess the quality of their relationships. Putting the time and effort into developing a social-support network may not only increase psychological health but also improve long-term physical health.

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to take a holistic view when considering what contributes to aging successfully. Those most likely to age well have good physical and psychological health, as well as a social-support network. Successful aging is not only the absence of chronic illness but also the perceived life satisfaction

of the elderly person. People with high levels of resilience, low rates of depression, few years of substance abuse, and a good social network are most likely to age successfully and, perhaps most importantly, report high levels of life satisfaction into their golden years.

⁷ Thacker, EL, et al. The American Heart Association life's simple 7 and incident cognitive impairment: the REasons for Geographic and Racial Difference in Stroke (REGARDS) study. *J Am Heart Assoc.* 2014;3(3):e000365.

⁸ Pietrzak R, Cook JM. Psychological resilience in older US Veterans: results from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans study. *Depress Anxiety* 2013;30:432-43.

⁹ Meng, X, D'Arcy C. Successful aging in Canada: prevalence and predictors from a population-based sample of older adults. *Gerontology* 2014;60(1):65-72.