

# TIPS FOR AGING SUCCESSFULLY



By Richard E. Dodge

Waiting to board a plane recently, I was reading *Aging Well*, an insightful book on some longitudinal studies of aging. A man headed for the check-in counter noticed my book, paused, and said with a smile: “Good luck.”

We both chuckled; then he headed toward the counter while I continued to read. But I pondered his expression. Although voiced tongue-in-cheek, his comment seemed to suggest a personal struggle with the aging process. He was not much older than me, yet I sensed a touch of frustration. I thought, *How do most people face aging?* Let’s face it: If God allows us to continue living, then aging is inevitable.

It became obvious that aging gracefully and positively is not entirely a matter of chance. Many external events in life—traffic accidents, random violence, and so forth—can halt life tragically. But most people live long and productive lives. Attitude and faith seem to be two of the most important aspects of growing older successfully.

Here are some ways to make aging a positive experience.



**Balance focuses in life.** Successful aging seems to be a balancing act between self, others, and God. Start with a godly focus in life.

Faith in God provides a strong foundation for life. Faith in God also helps us focus on others as we live out biblical mandates to love and meet the needs of others. God challenges us to love ourselves and grow spiritually.

**Develop a positive mindset.** Successful aging means we see the opportunities in life rather than life lost. Although the glass may seem half empty, this means we can refill the glass with new “water.” Focus on positive thoughts and actions. Invest yourself in ministry. Volunteer in community organizations. (What would hospi-

tals be today without “candy stripers”?)

**Discover lost loves.** As a child, I had a passion for electronic trains. Adult responsibilities—and limited space in our homes—precluded developing this hobby. When I retire, parts of our home will become centers for “playing” with my trains . . . and sharing that passion with friends and their grandchildren!

**Develop relationships.** Invest yourself not only in friendships, but also in caring for others in demonstrable ways. We can teach others how to do things for themselves and then set them free. Each of us develops a network of relationships in our work world. If we do not replace that social network after retirement, we face an emotional void that needs to be filled. God created us as emotional beings. Without a social network, we are incomplete.



**Learn something new all the time.** Growing minds and hearts have a very positive influence on aging. Whether through self-study or through group experiences, learning helps keep the mind active. Age generally does not limit learning; just the pace.

**Become a mentor.** Life offers many experiences, both positive and negative. Find younger adults who are willing to partner with you and become their mentor. But see this not as an instructional relationship; view this as a sharing of ideas and experiences. Let discovery become central to the mentoring relationship. As the apprentice discovers truths and realities, you succeed as a mentor.

**Accept some realities.** Each of us has something we deny despite its contradiction of reality. Here are some realities that must be faced: Smoking and alcohol abuse are destructive to good health. Poor diet can destroy our bodies. Without God, we are lost. Cholesterol and stress influence the quality and length of life. The Bible contains God’s plan for successful living.

**Be creative.** Each of us has some kind of creative skills; the task is to find them. We need to redefine what creative means. Creativity is not based on whether our painting, sculpture, or train layout is as good as someone else’s. Creativity is an expression of ourselves and how we see that which we create. My father-in-law expresses his creativity in painting. Several of his large paintings adorn the walls of his home. His creativity is expressed through paint-by-number paintings, and he generates a great deal of pleasure and self-satisfaction in his creativity.



**Play.** Most of us were told as youngsters to grow up and assume adult responsibilities. As aging adults we need to

regain the ability to play and have fun not only with ourselves, but also with others.

**Get physical.** Everyone needs physical activity, regardless of age and physical limitations. Get out of the house each day. We can age well by focusing on what we can do rather than on what we cannot. We should feel good even when we may be ill.

**Learn from the past without dwelling on it.** Mistakes are part of life. I've made my share of them. Mistakes become tragic in two ways: when we fail to learn from them and when we relive them constantly. Grow from the mistakes by integrating the lessons we learned while discarding the mistake itself.

**Walk daily with God.** Godly friendships do not replace friendship with God. Daily spiritual development is a lifelong process, one that does not end at retirement. Spend personal time in prayer, Bible study, and whatever other activities and experiences bring you closer to God.

Having served in churches in Florida, I've worked with people whose chronological age was the same, but whose attitudes toward life were years apart. Those whose attitudes belied their age seemed to have lived successfully in part by their vibrant faith in God's ability to help them through life and also because they made lemonade each time life handed them a lemon.

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*\*Aging Well, by George Vaillant, is published by Little, Brown and Company; © 2002 by George Vaillant, M.D. For more information on aging, read Aging Gracefully: Keeping the Joy in the Journey, ISBN: 0805426906.*

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