Successful Aging

By Rustem Medora

As we reach our boomer years, we begin to realize that we won't be young forever. Successful aging is something that becomes a recurring thought. Research in the area of aging demonstrates that mental stimulation, social interaction (including intergenerational interaction), physical activity and diet can delay symptoms associated with aging, such as physical and mental decline.

Much of the decline associated with old age has more to do with lifestyle than aging. The old adage that says "you lose it if you don't use it" is true. In order to maintain and promote cognitive wellness, Carol Miller, a gerontologist, in her book "Wellness In Older Adults" states that engaging in new learning experiences, participating in challenging leisure activities, and preserving and continuing social relationships with friends and family members is imperative to total wellness. Dr. Andrew Weil in his book "Spontaneous Healing" states, "We humans are social animals. Reach out to others. Make social interaction a priority. It is a powerful safeguard of emotional well-being."

Increasing social, cognitive and physical activity through intergenerational programs might help improve health for an aging population and improve educational learning for children. Older adults who are involved in intergenerational activities feel happier than those who are not involved. Residents at retirement communities who participated in intergenerational activities reported increased social interaction, mobility, and reduced daytime sleeping and voluntary confinement. Intergenerational relationships dispel stereotypical views of old age and help prevent age-related alienation. At the same time these activities strengthen individuals, families and communities.

Scientists have been studying plasticity in older adults since the 1960s. Plasticity refers to the ability of the brain to change physically in response to learning. They have found that learning activity links neurons (nerve cells) in patterns and stimulates growth of new junctions between two nerve cells. So it follows that mental decline in aging isn't due to the death of nerve cells, but rather due to poor connections between them. Thus, honing skills such as learning a new language, improving computer skills, doing crossword puzzles or taking classes that make you think are all to one's benefit as nerve cells continue to form new connections.

Dr. Robert Kahn, an 81-year-old professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Michigan, states that physically active people are more likely to maintain sharp mental ability, physical health and a positive outlook. Just as modest weight training can increase muscle strength, exercising the brain will improve learning. We know that regular physical exercise and lifestyle changes can prevent heart diseases and certain cancers, but these activities will also help us live longer and keep our memories functioning. The factor that contributes most to successful aging is having a physically active lifestyle. Being active can prevent older people from having a higher risk of health problems. Physical activity can be an important part of managing problems that might already be present, such as diabetes, high blood pressure or elevated cholesterol. It is
never too late to become physically active. No one is too old to enjoy the benefits of regular physical activities. In fact, older Americans have more to gain than younger people by remaining actively engaged.

In a recent article in the Smithsonian, Rick Bass praises Missoula as a great town to live in and states, "Missoula balances out-of-door attractions and the arts." To that quote, I would add that it allows for intellectual pursuits as well. Besides the possible outdoor activities available in western Montana, Missoula can also boast in having more health clubs per capita than most towns its size.

As far as the intellectual activities are concerned, we have the University of Montana that offers classes for all age groups while classes at the Dickinson Lifelong Learning Center and the Montana Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (MOLLI) are for older adults. MOLLI not only offers mentally stimulating classes every quarter, but also offers intergenerational classes in summer for the young and old. So, baby boomers, you have no excuse, call these health clubs and learning centers.

*Rustem Medora is emeritus professor of pharmacognosy in the University of Montana College of Health Professions. He can be reached at (406)243-4943 or email rustem.medora@umontana.edu.* This article appeared in the *Missoulian* on January 17, 2012.