

## Keys to Aging Well

8 Research-Based Articles on Music, Laughter  
& Other Ingredients of Aging Well



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Institute on Aging

# KEYS TO AGING WELL

What steps are you taking to Age Well? Interested in some new ideas or activities that have been proven to benefit people's health and well-being—especially those of older adults? Then look no further than the articles in this booklet. Originally published as Orange Papers (the Mather LifeWays version of educational white papers), each is based on scientific research, and covers a thought-provoking topic on what really works when it comes to Aging Well.

These Orange Papers were written by the nationally recognized researchers, educators, and other professionals at Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging. The Institute is a global resource for information about wellness, successful aging service innovations, and educational programming.

Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging has been recognized nationally for best practices and commitment to quality in the senior living industry; the Institute's most recent recognition was an LTC LINK Spirit of Innovation Award in the category of Patient Wellness for the tool *mobile* Observing Quality of Life in Dementia.

In constant pursuit of new Ways to Age Well<sup>SM</sup> the Institute continues to garner praise for its significant advancements in aging-related education and research.

The Institute has a collaborative relationship with Mather LifeWays senior living residences. Residents in our communities enjoy positive effects from programs developed by the Institute, including staff training on topics from everyday resident safety to preparation for natural disasters. Mather LifeWays residences are also used as pilot sites for new industry training and research, which is then made available to communities around the United States.

Look for more Orange Papers and other free resources online at [www.matherlifeways.com/free-resources](http://www.matherlifeways.com/free-resources).

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## Take Note(s): Living Well through Music

Music is everywhere. People everywhere can be seen donning headphones whether they're reading, exercising, traveling, or shopping. What is it about songs that captivates mass audiences? All in all, why is music such a big deal? The answers to these questions are important—especially in regard to cultivating your health and well-being.



### MUSIC'S INFLUENCE ON THE HUMAN MIND

Aside from the frequent head-bobs and toe-taps that result from enjoying a good song, music touches people on a much deeper level. A very interesting and applicable effect of music is how listening to songs can shift your mood. One of the most influential factors in the process of physiological change through music is your brain's limbic system.

Located in the middle of the brain, the limbic system controls instinct, mood/emotions, and sensations. How exactly is music associated with this region? When you listen to a tune, the vibrations of the song travel into your brain via nerves, and when these vibrations reach the limbic system, it becomes activated. In turn, this activation stimulates specific body systems that result in increased heart rate and endorphin levels. In addition, tunes also touch the right hemisphere of your brain, the side of the brain associated with creativity and imagination. It is this portion of your brain that governs the ability to be wrapped up in a good song. With all of these physiological changes occurring in your brain, you can see how music is capable of greatly affecting a person.

In addition, there are two levels of processing involved in listening to music: *unconscious* and *conscious*. The conscious, and more obvious, processing level involves comprehending melody. You are fully aware of your appreciation of a song's melody—you may often sing, hum, or whistle along. The melody is the most recognized part of any song, and it works to activate your intelligence and imagination. Processing the melody of a song is *very conscious*—it allows you to knowingly acknowledge what songs or genres you do or do not like. In contrast, on an *unconscious* level, people identify with music through rhythm. The vibrations from the bass line, back beat, or percussion excite your autonomic nervous system and therefore initiate the above-mentioned domino effect of physiological systems.

The combination of these physical changes and the conscious and unconscious levels of processing make music fully capable of shifting your mood. The technical term for this is the *iso principle*. The iso principle describes when a mood is matched with a style of music and how it changes as the style of music changes. For example, if you feel relaxed or tired, you can play a slow, soothing song; if the song changes to a fast, upbeat song, you'll feel more energized and aroused as a result. People frequently use the iso principle perhaps without knowing it; oftentimes motivating, fast-paced songs pump up athletes for sporting events, or people might play relaxing melodies to unwind after a stressful day. You can see clearly just how powerful the iso principle is and how easily you can incorporate this practice into daily life.

## MUSIC THERAPY

Music therapy is a form of alternative medicine that is becoming increasingly popular even though it has been around for quite a long time. In fact, in Old English the word “heal” means “to make a sound,” and the word “sound” means “health and wholeness.” In the 1700s, doctors used music to treat depression and Florence Nightingale used it to ease soldiers’ pain during the Crimean War.

Music therapy for pain management has been proven highly effective in many studies, and interestingly enough, just listening to music—any style of music—on a daily basis results in a drastic decrease in pain reported by patients. This form of therapy is effective for all age ranges, but it has been proven most successful for the older adult population.

Music therapy can also ease depression. Research has indicated that when incorporating music into a patient’s treatment and usual routine, uplifting songs can have an elevating effect on mood. In numerous studies, patients consistently reported feeling less depressed and experienced fewer symptoms of depression overall.

A third and very interesting type of music therapy is called *Rhythmic Auditory Stimulation (RAS)*, a technique designed to improve the movement and walking abilities of older adults, especially stroke victims or those suffering from Parkinson’s. For these individuals, walking and other forms of movement are often very difficult. RAS works by having such individuals listen to music with very steady, distinct beats as they participate in physical therapy exercises. Therapists encourage the individuals to make their movements to the beat, and this actually helps them to work longer, have smoother movements, move more quickly, and walk longer distances. Simply listening to music helps to further all of these great steps toward recovery and improvement for people who could otherwise be suffering.

In all cases, music therapy is an inexpensive, noninvasive, and safe form of therapy that can benefit people of all ages.



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## MUSIC MEMORY

You may notice that you easily remember song lyrics from a tune you heard decades ago. This type of recollection is known as *music memory*, which begins to form most fully between the ages of 15 to 25. At this time, a person's ability to associate music or a specific song with memories of time, place, emotional state, and even a sense of identity fully develop; all the elements of where, when, and with whom an individual learned a song can potentially stay with him/her forever. Music memory is so powerful in fact that some physicians have started to use it to treat Alzheimer's disease. While it is not a cure, tapping into music memory can help alleviate some of the most devastating symptoms, including memory loss. Playing a favorite or familiar song for those suffering from Alzheimer's has been known to help patients become vocal when they were otherwise mute; to get up and dance or just move after being stationary; and to express and detail memories that were thought to be lost forever.



## INTEGRATING MUSIC ON A DAILY BASIS

There are multiple ways music can be positively implemented into one's daily life and routine. Even with a busy schedule, people can easily incorporate music into their hectic lifestyles and reap the many benefits. The first way is to utilize its relaxing qualities. Listening to soothing, calming melodies can ease stress, relieving physical and mental tensions and anxiety. Also, soft music is great when used as part of a cool down after exercising or as a way to drift off to sleep.

A second way to use music daily is while exercising. Making music a part of any sweat routine is a great idea, as this simple act can improve any workout. Studies comparing a control (no music) group with an experimental (music) group show that those in the experimental group were more diligent in their workouts, more persistent, returned to the gym more often, worked out for longer periods of time, and in the long run (literally!), remained more committed to their exercise plans. With all of these factors combined, those who incorporated music into their workouts saw more long-term benefits than the control group, allowing for their health and wellness to be greatly impacted.

Third, individuals can further enjoy music by listening to it while at work. Numerous studies conducted in a wide spectrum of workplaces—from factories to offices—conclude that listening to music while working is very beneficial for employees, and resolutely, for companies. Employees who get some grooves going are more productive, efficient, diligent, and even report enjoying their job more than those who do not listen to music.

From its therapeutic aspects and ability to boost physical activity, to helping with relaxation and stress management, music is one major and easy path to living well!

# Did You Hear the One about . . . ?

## A Laugh a Day Just Might Keep the Doctor Away

You can do it by yourself or with others . . . it requires about 20 muscles (but it hardly seems like a strain), and 30 seconds of it can be equivalent to a great workout!

Yes, we're talking about laughter—a simple thing we do and take for granted. Laughter is very powerful, as it has been proven to actually alleviate pain. Though most of us aren't aware of it, we could really use a good laugh each day. Laughter and humor help us relax, lower our stress levels, and help us find “the funny”, which can give us a new perspective on seemingly difficult situations. When shared, laughter can help us connect with family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers.



### THE SCIENCE OF LAUGHTER: EARLY PIONEERS

The study of laughter and its psychological and physiological effects on the body is called *gelotology*, which comes from the Greek word *gelos*, meaning “to laugh.” Some of the earliest observers of laughter include eighteenth-century French Enlightenment writer Voltaire, who lamented, “The art of medicine consists of keeping the patient amused while medicine heals the disease.” Scientist Charles Darwin lauded its “high evolutionary significance,” and nearly 30 years later, philosopher Henri Bergson penned an essay about why people laugh, basing his thoughts on laughter as a caricature of human habits used by clowns and comics to generate hilarity.

### RECENT RESEARCH & OBSERVATIONS

Dr. Lee Berk, preventive care specialist and researcher at Loma Linda University, has studied the impact of humor on the immune system and found remarkable results: laughter decreases blood pressure, reduces stress hormones, and increases muscle flexion. In addition, laughter was found to boost immune function by increasing infection-fighting T cells as well as *IgB* (immunoglobulin) that helps antibodies attack dysfunctional cells. Berk and his colleagues also determined that laughter triggers the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkilling chemicals that produce a general sense of well-being.

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“Finding the funny” might become even more important as we face changes brought on by careers, technology, aging, politics, media, illness, loss of loved ones, and the economy, among other variables.

Dr. Diane Mahony, associate professor of psychology at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, describes how your health can improve through laughter and humor. For a start, vigorous laughter is stimulating; it increases heart rate, blood pressure, and circulation. It also circulates immune substance effectiveness, pulmonary ventilation, and alertness, and it exercises the skeletal muscles.

And after all that laughing, your body still benefits. Dr. William F. Fry Jr., psychiatrist and professor emeritus from the Stanford University School of Medicine, offers that post-laughter, there is a brief period when blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and muscle activity decrease, resulting in relaxation. In other words: Ha, ha, ha . . . ahhh.

It’s important to note that laughter and humor are obviously closely tied; however, the presence of humor does not necessarily guarantee laughter. As most of us have probably experienced, what’s funny to one person might not be funny to someone else. We often have to consider what’s “funny” appropriate—and that includes taking into account the audience’s age, culture, gender, and language, as well as social norms.

## A FAMOUS CASE OF LAUGHTER THERAPY

One of the most famous cases of laughter used as medicine is told by author and journalist Norman Cousins, who shared his experience with the healing powers of laughter in his 1979 book, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient*. Cousins, an editor of *The Saturday Evening Post* for 35 years, wrote about his 1964 diagnosis with a serious illness involving the disintegration of his spine’s connective tissue. One of his doctors gave him a one-in-500 chance for a full recovery, but Cousins spoke about how he took an active role in his own healing by watching *Candid Camera* reruns and Marx Brothers films as tools to relieve pain. Cousins realized laughter elicited positive emotions that had therapeutic value for him, and these positive emotions included hope, faith, love, a will to live, cheerfulness, humor, creativity, playfulness, confidence, and great expectations.

## THE ROLE OF LAUGHTER AS WE AGE

The need to embrace positive emotions and have fun does not diminish as we age. In fact, “finding the funny” might become even more important as we face changes brought on by careers, technology, aging, politics, media, illness, loss of loved ones, and the economy, among other variables. Patty Wooten, RN, BSN, and former president of the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, classified three types of therapeutic humor: *hoping*, *coping*, and *gallows humor*.

*Hoping* is the ability to hope for something better in spite of overwhelming circumstances; an example of this could be watching a familiar comic do a favorite routine to provide a safe haven in a time of trouble. *Coping* changes thinking and helps regain a sense of control; for example, Jane Hill, cancer survivor and comic, once compared her operations to airline travel and thought she had enough “frequent gurney miles” for a free operation. Finally, *gallows humor* recognizes the intolerable aspects of a situation and transforms it into something tolerable; Jane Hill might say one of the advantages to having cancer is that people don’t ask you to help them move!

## WAYS TO INTRODUCE LAUGHTER: LAUGHTER YOGA & MORE

There are many ways to add laughter to your life beyond laughing with friends and family or watching a television show or movie. There are actually therapeutic methods and organized clubs you can try, such as a laughter club, sometimes called Laughter Yoga.

Since its introduction in 1995 in Mumbai, India, by Dr. Madan Kataria (aka “The Guru of Giggling”), Laughter Yoga has spread across the globe and is now enjoyed in more than 55 countries. Judith Sample, a certified Laughter Yoga instructor in Chicago, describes this therapy as “. . . using ‘fake’ laughter in spontaneous ways, along with yogic breathing, to stimulate inner joy. The laughter becomes spontaneous very quickly.” Laughter Yoga uses improvisational games that require no acting ability or sense of humor. It employs deep breathing, gentle movement, and laughter chants—and for those intimidated by yoga, good news! There are no yoga poses. Anyone of any age can participate and previous exercise experience is not necessary. For older adults with limited mobility, Laughter Yoga can be extremely beneficial.

In addition to Laughter Yoga, there are many other ways to incorporate a good time into your daily life. Ask yourself when, where, and with whom you laugh the most. Do you like droll and dry humor or slapstick and physical comedy? Determining your type of humor can lead you to more sources. You might also consider reading the comics, watching funny movies, playing with pets or children, singing or watching karaoke, visiting a comedy club, surrounding yourself with funny and uplifting people, or holding a clean joke contest!

Laughter affects how we communicate. When “the funny” alleviates pressure or serves as a barometer for how we view life, it serves as a signal for us to continue looking at all that is good around us. Whether we use Laughter Yoga to tickle our funny bones or try to see the humor in the simplest of details, the ability to guffaw can help change our outlook from dark to sunny—if even for a few moments.



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# Does Mindful Eating Help You Eat Less or Just Better?



You've probably heard about all the ways to lose weight and then some. Diets, fads, no diets, power bars, shakes—you name it. Well, research indicates that mindful eating might be a good place to begin.

The term “mindfulness” refers to being in the moment. And that’s not always so easy. We can get stuck in our own thoughts and self-talk as life passes us by. We can all say, at one point in time or another, that we have become mindless in our eating habits. We eat meal after meal, snack after snack, barely aware of what and how much we’re eating. Being mindful with our eating means paying attention to our food—really paying attention—and we begin to notice all sorts of wonderful aspects of the food, and how much we’re putting into our bodies.

## FIRST, THE BAD NEWS

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than one billion adults worldwide are overweight, with at least 300 million of them obese. In the United States, obesity has reached epidemic proportions: one-third of adults—33.8 percent—are obese. And there really haven’t been many, if any, effective interventions to address obesity. The need to focus on innovative solutions to weight loss and management is crucial.

Numerous studies have demonstrated obesity to be positively associated with increased risk of a variety of chronic diseases, and, more than three decades and millions of dollars later, solutions to the problem of obesity for any demographic remain elusive. Even the most promising weight-loss interventions are unable to prevent high percentages of individuals from regaining any weight lost within a short period of time. While some researchers argue that only macro-level environmental changes will bring out decreases in obesity rates, to date, such changes have been no more successful than behavioral interventions.

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## ABOUT MINDFULNESS & EATING

The concept of mindfulness dates back many centuries, originating in Buddhist practice. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has been at the forefront of efforts to apply an understanding of this type of mindfulness to mainstream research. Kabat-Zinn defines the concept as “the awareness that emerges when paying attention in a particular way, that is, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.” In this, we can understand the idea of purposeful and conscious attentiveness as opposed to automated reactions.

In the last few decades, mindfulness has increasingly gained the attention of practitioners and researchers in the fields of medicine and psychology. Much of the current research on mindfulness employs a program called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Kabat-Zinn about 25 years ago as a pain management intervention. The focus of MBSR is on the cultivation of mindfulness through meditative practice. The program consists of eight, two-and-one-half hour meetings concluding with an all-day meditation retreat. The effectiveness of MBSR in treatment of pain, depression, and anxiety disorders has since been well-established with rigorous clinical trials. In addition, recent analysis concludes that MBSR may help both clinicians and others with a broad range of clinical and non-clinical problems.

Only recently has mindfulness been applied to the study of eating behaviors. The relative consistency of findings is enough to suggest that it may be worthy of attention. Much of the research concerning mindfulness and eating has focused on clinical populations, including individuals who suffer from binge eating disorder (BED) and bulimia. In the first of three studies, researchers implemented a pilot program on Mindfulness Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT) among obese women with BED and although participants did not demonstrate weight loss, the six-week intervention resulted in a large and significant reduction in depression and the number of binge episodes per week.

A second study of mindfulness and binge eating recruited 25 individuals from the general public to participate in a brief set of eating exercises. This intervention resulted in significant decreases in binge eating, stated anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Studies also support the notion of mindful eating as an intervention for individuals with eating disorders. One of these studies included six college-age women with bulimia nervosa describing their experience with a mindfulness-based eating disorder (M-BED) treatment group through interviews and

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There is some encouraging information available stating that mindfulness plays a positive role in weight loss or gain.



self-portraits. Another study used a similar approach in an analysis of personal journals of 25 obese women completing a 12-week yoga and mindfulness meditation course. There was considerable overlap in the findings from the two studies—in both, participants described how the experience of the group resulted in their greater self-awareness and acceptance. The women in one study also reported experiencing less emotional distress and improved ability to manage stress following the program, whereas the other study characterized the main shift in participants as one from disconnection to a “healthy reconnection” to food and to their bodies. Participants in the former study also reported reduced food intake, decreased eating speed, and healthier food choices throughout the program.

## CAN MINDFUL EATING HELP CANCER PATIENTS?

Cancer patients are another clinical population that has been targeted with mindful eating training. Chemoradiation therapy for head and neck cancer can result in anorexia, weight loss, fatigue, and nausea. Patients often require nutrition support via gastrointestinal tubes during treatment and subsequently find it difficult to transition back to eating normally when treatment ends. In this case, mindful eating has been used to help individuals eat *more*.

Consistent with several of the studies discussed above, some of the preliminary research in this area lends support to the idea that mindfulness promotes changes in eating behavior through an increased ability to recognize and attend to internal rather than external cues. Patient reports also confirm the value of mindfulness in helping them deal with and manage emotional distress.

While there is still so much to learn about mindful eating and how it can help you, there is some encouraging information available stating that mindfulness plays a positive role in weight loss or gain—depending on the person.

# Top 10 Power Foods for Older Adults

The old saying, “you are what you eat” is true. Today’s health care professionals all agree: it’s possible to reduce your risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, and even certain types of cancer by simply looking at your current diet. Depending on your condition, your diet may require modification, or, if you’re in a diet rut, you can change up your own menu cheaply and easily.

The first and most important step before undertaking a diet change is to talk with your doctor, who will discuss your general health related to diet and will recommend resources—including a consultation with a registered dietician. And, just like what your mother told you years ago, the first advice you are likely to hear is that moderation is the key to good health. And while most dietary plans tell you what you can’t eat (usually your favorite foods), the best nutrition strategy involves focusing on what you can and should eat. In fact, research has shown that adding certain foods to your diet is just as important as cutting back on others.



## TOP 10 POWER FOODS

### 1. Whole Grains – For general protection

- Three daily servings of whole grains can help reduce the risk of *heart disease* (by 25 to 36 percent); *stroke* (by 37 percent); and *diabetes* (by 21 to 27 percent)
- Whole grains fill you up fast so you are less likely to overeat
- **TIP:** Look for “whole grain” on labels; whole grains include oats, whole wheat, brown rice, bulgur, and bran

### 2. Yogurt – For boosting immunity

- Source of probiotics, the “friendly” bacteria that fight illness and disease
- Research has found that eating yogurt helps the body fight off pneumonia
- **TIP:** Look for yogurt containing “live” or “active” cultures

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### 3. Salmon – For bones

- Source of omega-3 fatty acids, which are thought to help preserve bone density
- May reduce blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and help prevent heart disease
- May also help fight prostate cancer, depression/mood disorders, and reduce arthritis pain
- Alternative sources: cold-water fish, including sardines, tuna, and mackerel
- **TIP/CAUTION:** Watch for mercury levels in some fish; check where all fish comes from, the type of fish, and eat in moderation: about one, 3-ounce fillet or can of fish per week

### 4. Walnuts – For heart health

- Source of omega-3 fatty acids, which may reduce the risk of heart disease and high blood pressure
- Research has found that eating 1/4 to 1/3 cup of walnuts per day can lower “bad” cholesterol by up to 10 percent
- Alternative sources: almonds and pistachios—high in arginine, an amino acid that helps increase blood flow to the heart
- **TIP/CAUTION:** Eat nuts in moderation, as they are high in fat and calories

### 5. Blueberries – For cognitive health

- Have the highest levels of disease-fighting antioxidants (out of 40 different fruits and vegetables)
- One half-cup is only 40 calories, has almost no fat, plenty of vitamin C, and two grams of fiber
- May also decrease brain damage from stroke and effects of Alzheimer’s or dementia
- Protect cells from damage and may restore cells to healthy levels

### 6. Beans – To help fight colon cancer

- Source of protein and antioxidants; provide plenty of fiber, which may prevent colon cancer
- Can decrease blood pressure and “bad” cholesterol, lowering risk of heart disease
- **TIP:** All beans are good for you; two to four servings a week is recommended



## 7. Tomatoes – For prostate health

- Regular consumption can decrease risk of prostate cancer by up to 35 percent
- Can help men already diagnosed with prostate cancer; recent research showed that men who consumed tomato sauce daily for three weeks found their Prostate-Specific Antigen (PSA) levels decreased by 20 percent
- Contain lycopene, another antioxidant thought to protect against lung and stomach cancers
- **TIP:** Cooked tomatoes may have more potency than fresh ones

## 8. Apples – For lung health

- Can be more effective in fighting lung disease than other fruits and vegetables
- Smokers may be less likely to develop emphysema and bronchitis on an apple-a-day diet
- Have only about 80 calories, little fat, and plenty of fiber (a special type called pectin, which helps to lower cholesterol and control blood sugar)
- Have the mineral boron, which is thought to boost alertness and reduce the risk of osteoporosis
- **TIP:** “An apple a day” really can keep the doctor away!

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Smokers may be less likely to develop emphysema and bronchitis on an apple-a-day diet.

## 9. Ginger – For dealing with nausea

- Considered helpful in fighting morning sickness and queasy stomachs
- May also help lower blood pressure and increase circulation


## 10. Red Grapes – For a heart health

- Contain polyphenols, which are thought to help fight heart disease
- **NOTE:** If you’ve heard the term “The French Paradox,” then you understand how red grapes are important to lowering the risk of heart disease; the Paradox explains how the French, (who tend to eat foods high in fat) have a lower risk of heart disease



# Oh, Think of the Possibilities!

## Creative Thinking at Work & at Play



Remember the last time you were in an art museum viewing paintings or sculpture and found yourself thinking, “This person was a creative genius . . . I could never do that”? Well, creativity is about more than the idea of “genius”; it is an innate human ability that every individual possesses. Yes, that means you. You just need to learn how to tap into your natural wellspring of creative prowess. Read on to learn how.



### WHAT IS CREATIVITY ANYWAY?

According to Dr. Keith Simonton, dean and professor of psychology at University of California-Davis, creativity is generally considered to be a form of “optimal functioning” among human beings. It is both a tool to lead a more productive life and a blessing to lead a more relaxed and happy life. As a complex skill, creativity has been defined and understood in many different ways. Most simply, Simonton states, “creativity is the ability to create something original that is useful and solves some kind of problem.”

Creativity is a mental process that can be practiced and strengthened by nearly anyone, as with any other skill. Simonton asserts that creative potential seems to be most encouraged by a developmental environment that includes multicultural experiences that expose individuals to possibilities outside of the culture to which they have been socialized, and difficult experiences that strengthen the ability to persevere. According to research from the Center for Aging, Health & Humanities at the George Washington University Medical Center, the power to be creative is an innate ability, something that each of us is born with, and it does not decline with age.

Creativity lies in the intersection between your current creative thinking skills, your current knowledge of the problem, and your motivation to solve it. Each of these factors is under your control; therefore, you have control over your creative thinking ability and what you do with it. Consider this quote from Nolan Bushnell, founder of Atari and Chuck E. Cheese: “Everyone who’s ever taken a shower has had an idea. It’s the person who gets out of the shower, dries off, and does something about it who makes a difference.” What great idea did you have this morning?

## CREATIVITY AT HOME

What do you like to do outside of work? What activities do you participate in simply because you enjoy them? Make note of what they are, because they are the key to your health and happiness. Having activities in your life that you are intrinsically motivated to participate in can be deeply fulfilling.

Activities you want to participate in are an important form of self-expression and a way of creating identity. No one forces you to paint watercolor landscape paintings on the weekend or write songs at night—you do it because you feel compelled to do so, and these activities bring you joy. And since research indicates that creativity appears more often when someone is intrinsically motivated, you are more likely to be creative in these types of situations.

Becoming engrossed in an enjoyable activity can lead you to experience *flow*, a euphoric experience where you are so engaged in an activity that you become entirely engrossed in it. This state is characterized by being highly focused and unaware of your surroundings, feeling peaceful and ecstatic. Think of it as being “in the zone.” You can increase the likelihood of experiencing *flow* by: engaging in an activity you genuinely enjoy, setting goals that are slightly above your skill level, continually raising the challenge level as your performance improves, screening out distraction, seeking feedback, and concentrating on the sensory elements of the experience.

And according to researchers, creative activities and the satisfaction they bring can reduce stress and anxiety, sharpen the brain and stem the onset of dementia, boost self-confidence, and improve overall health and well-being. Positive experiences can make you emotionally, mentally, and physically healthier. So, the next time you feel guilty about indulging in an activity you’re not obligated to do, remind yourself that pleasurable activities improve your health and make you happier and more well-balanced!



## WHY CREATIVE THOUGHT MATTERS

Creativity, in all its forms, adds meaning and richness to your life and the lives of those you impact. It is important to set aside personal time for yourself each day. Pleasant activities provide an outlet for identity creation and personal expression, and when we are fully engaged in an activity we truly enjoy, we have the potential of experiencing the euphoria of *flow*. When we participate in meaningful activities that we enjoy, we are happier, healthier, and have a more positive sense of well-being.

Take it from actress Sophia Loren: “There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age.”

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# In the Pursuit of Happiness

## Moving beyond Daily Pleasures & Experiences



You are watching your granddaughter's first soccer game and notice how endearing it is that she keeps looking over to make sure you are watching her. She dribbles towards the goal, kicks, and then scores her first soccer goal! She looks back at you with a smile on her face, seeing you jump up and down with excitement. *At this moment, are you happy?* You've had an exhausting day running errands, but you come home, consumed by the excitement of seeing Spike, your cocker spaniel who is so excited to welcome you home! *Are you happy?*

Of course you are happy! You are experiencing two highly satisfying experiences: one, seeing your granddaughter score her first goal; and two, being greeted by a “best friend” that can't wait to tell you how much he has missed you today. What if instead, you were asked, “Are you satisfied with your life enough to know that you will leave behind a positive legacy?” or, “If you could change anything about your life, would you?”

### NEW STUDIES REVEAL THE SCIENCE BEHIND HAPPINESS

For most people, happiness is defined as pleasurable or satisfying experiences; but, in the field of psychology, new studies behind the “science of happiness” argue that this state of mind is more profound than engaging in daily pleasures and experiences. To experience lasting happiness, positive psychologists suggest we should seek fulfillment (pleasant life), become more engaged (good life), and find meaning and purpose (meaningful life) in our lives.

### MAKING THE SWITCH TO POSITIVE WAYS OF THINKING

Some psychologists estimate that more than 90 percent of research on emotions has concentrated on various forms of mental illness such as depression and anxiety. However, during the last few years, more than 3,000 scientific papers have explored the benefits and impacts of happiness. Why? Positive psychologists believe that by studying positive

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Research conducted by Dr. David Lykken proposed the idea that humans have a pre-determined “happiness set point”—a genetic trait that helps to determine our life satisfaction.

strengths, attitudes, and behaviors, individuals can develop ways to transform their whole being. Once we begin the paradigm shift from negative to positive attitudes and behaviors, it allows us to become more wellness-minded—perhaps enabling us to live longer.

## ARE WE BORN WITH IT?

Research conducted by the University of Minnesota's Dr. David Lykken proposed the idea that humans have a pre-determined "happiness set point"—a genetic trait that helps to determine our life satisfaction. This "happiness set point," is essentially a default happiness level that we return to repeatedly after positive and negative events or experiences. When Lykken surveyed 4,000 sets of identical and fraternal twins from 1936–1955, he found that 50 percent of one's life satisfaction comes from our genetic programming, which means that our genes influence our personality. Our circumstantial factors (income, marital status, religion, climate, etc.) contribute about 8 percent to our "happiness set point," while the remaining portion is attributed to our life experiences.

## MONEY, MARRIAGE, YOUTH, RELIGION— WHAT REALLY MAKES US HAPPY?

In 1967, psychologist Warner Wilson found that happy people are young, healthy, and married. In the same study, Wilson also emphasized money, education, and religiosity as factors in our happiness. However, later research proves that only half of these claims turned out to be true. So what *circumstances* make us happy? If you're looking to strike it rich in the lottery to solve life's problems, there is strong evidence that money does not buy happiness. Research conducted by positive psychologists Ed Diener and Robert Biswas-Diener demonstrated that, once basic needs are met, additional income does little to raise our level of happiness or satisfaction with life.

Conversely, marriage is one of the factors strongly correlated with happiness. Ninety-five percent of the adult population marries at some point, with 40 percent of them saying they are "very happy." Only 23 percent of unmarried adults describe themselves this way. But, the relationship of marriage and happiness is complicated because it does not answer the question: Does marriage really make us happier, or do happier people have a higher tendency of getting married? Or, perhaps it's age and the wisdom behind our years that encourages lasting happiness.

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According to a 2007 survey by economists David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald, the path of happiness and age follow a U-shaped curve throughout the course of our lives. Between the ages of 16 and 45, we see the highest probability of depression. After 45, the probability of depression starts to decline. The two authors theorize that those in mid-life experience a greater probability of depression because they realize that they may not have the ability to achieve their childhood dreams anymore. They also speculate that, as we age, we have a greater chance to profit from our own sense of wisdom.

Recent research has indicated that, among individuals who are weekly churchgoers, 85 percent reported being “very satisfied” with life. According to Dr. Michael Nielsen of Georgia Southern University, this is partly attributed to firm value systems, positive spiritual experiences or feelings of transcendence, and the strong social support system within religious communities.

## CAN WE REALLY INFLUENCE OUR OWN HAPPINESS?

With 50 percent of happiness predetermined through our genetic makeup, is it possible to raise our level of happiness? Yes, if you consider that the other half of the formula is based on our personal circumstances and life experiences. As previously reported, a small percentage (8 percent) of our “happiness set point” can be influenced through our strong social bonds with family and friends, marriage, and a connection to community and faith.

Throughout the course of our lives, we can experience both positive and negative events that have a similar impact on our level of happiness. Those experiences allow our happiness to temporarily fluctuate from our “happiness set point,” but we eventually adapt to those changes and return to our normal range. To permanently shift our range to find enduring happiness, we need to become aware of, and concentrate on, experiencing and savoring positive experiences (the pleasant life), becoming more engaged (the good life), and finding a personal path filled with meaning and purpose (the purposeful life).



# Participation in Online Communities & Psychosocial Well-Being among Older Adults

## Social Isolation as a Public Health Problem

Keeping to oneself. Retreating from or shunning society. Preferring alone time—all the time. Within the older adult population, social isolation is a common occurrence—and it means more than just an empty calendar, void of social engagements or plans.

Extensive research shows that there is a strong relationship between social isolation and health—specifically that socially isolated individuals have more health problems and consequently, consume more health care resources than socially active individuals. In addition, findings indicate that socially isolated, ill individuals have worse outcomes from acute surgical procedures, and numerous studies have demonstrated a positive association between social isolation and mental illness—including depression, distress, and dementia.



### THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Social engagement—defined by some researchers as *making social and emotional connections with people and the community*—has been shown to contribute to the successful aging of older adults. Specifically, it has been shown that social engagement is the primary driver of improved psychological well-being in older adults and provides them with resources to cope with the common health problems and life changes associated with aging. Some documented benefits include: decreased rates of mortality, reduced functional decline, increased happiness and improved quality of life, and reduced risk of cognitive impairment. Aspects of social connectedness such as integration within dense social networks may also promote healthy behaviors, resulting in better health outcomes for socially connected individuals.

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### THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

As the proportion of individuals currently online has increased, so has research examining how these new forms of communication affect social support and psychosocial well-being. In 2011, The Pew Research Center found that 52 percent of older adults aged 50 to 64 use the



Internet daily to search for information, while 37 percent of older adults aged 65 and better search online daily. A large number—51 percent—of older adults aged 50 to 64 use social networking sites, and 33 percent of older adults aged 65 and better use them. Sixty-one percent of older adults aged 50 to 64 use e-mail, while 46 percent of older adults aged 65 and better use it.

What does this mean for socially isolated individuals? Studies indicate that among older adults, using the Internet (in general) yields positive experiences—contact with friends and family, a greater sense of community, and attendance at social gatherings—and this contact can lead to more social engagement. A related study found that using the Internet as a communication tool is associated with decreased social loneliness if interactions are between existing contacts.

## ONLINE COMMUNITIES AS PUBLIC HEALTH INTERVENTIONS

It's been found that older adults who have one or more disabilities, are living with a chronic disease, or are socially isolated are least likely to use the Internet; however, a number of studies suggest that it is possible to reach these subsets of the older adult population with Internet-based interventions.

One example examined the effects of a web-based intervention on psychosocial well-being among older adults with diabetes (aged 60 and better). Findings were very positive, with the intervention group showing significant improvement on quality of life, depression, social support, and self-efficacy. Another study found that homebound and disabled older adults who participated in an online community designed for their use significantly increased satisfaction in the amount of contact with others. Similarly, physically frail older adults participating in an Internet-based intervention to help them monitor self-care needs reported feeling more connected to friends and family and less socially isolated as a result of their computer use.

Lastly, there is evidence that Internet-based interventions can improve social well-being even among those in poor health with limited or no computer experience. In a study among individuals in congregate housing and nursing facilities, researchers demonstrated that Internet training and access improved psychosocial outcomes even though 69 percent of the participants had no previous experience with computers. Notably, 60 percent of individuals were still using the Internet on at least a weekly basis at the conclusion of the study.

The positive findings from these studies—along with trends of increasing use among older adults overall—suggest that the Internet may be a promising component to increasing psychosocial well-being among diverse groups of older adults.

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# Turn on the Tap!

## Drink More Water for Better Health

Getting enough water is one of the best things you can do for your health, at any age and at any time of year.

### 10 POWERFUL REASONS TO STAY HYDRATED

1. Without water nothing lives. Water is the main source of energy and the first nutrient the body needs.
2. Water is the main solvent for all foods, vitamins, and minerals.
3. Water is the main lubricant in the joint spaces and helps prevent arthritis and back pain.
4. Water helps prevent glaucoma and gives luster to the eyes.
5. Water dilutes the blood and prevents clotting during circulation.
6. Water gives us power for brain functions, like thinking.
7. Water is essential for the body's cooling system in the form of sweat and the heating, or electrical systems.
8. Water restores the normal sleep rhythms.
9. Water clears toxic waste from different parts of the body and takes it to the liver and kidneys for disposal.
10. Water is absolutely vital for making the immune system more efficient to fight infections and cancer cells when they are formed.



### RAISE A GLASS—OR TEN

Although you do get some water through food and other liquids, it's recommended that you drink a minimum of eight to ten glasses of water every day. Sound like a lot? Consider that every 24 hours, your body uses as much as eight glasses of its water for essential functions (like bathroom breaks and breathing)—and you need to replace that water! Just like you wouldn't let your car run out of gas before you head for the gas station, don't let your body get dehydrated before you turn on the tap.



## ABOUT MATHER LIFEWAYS

Mather LifeWays is a unique, non-denominational not-for-profit organization based in Evanston, Illinois, founded more than 70 years ago. We are dedicated to developing and implementing Ways to Age Well<sup>SM</sup> by creating programs, places, and residences for today's young-at-heart older adults.

We provide a continuum of living and care; make neighborhoods better places for older adults to live, work, learn, contribute, and play; and identify, implement, and share best practices for wellness programs, aging-in-the-workplace issues, emergency preparedness, staff development, and online education and programs empowering working family caregivers.

Our organization was founded in 1941 by Alonzo Mather, a well-regarded humanitarian and innovative entrepreneur, and his inspiring past fuels our future. We are committed to being an ongoing resource for older adults and our partners—continuing to introduce progressive ideas and help advance all areas of aging and living well.

Find us at [www.matherlifeways.com](http://www.matherlifeways.com)

### Headquarters

1603 Orrington Avenue, Suite 1800  
Evanston, IL 60201 • (847) 492.7500

### Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging

1603 Orrington Avenue, Suite 1800  
Evanston, IL 60201 • (888) 722.6468

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### The Mather

425 Davis Street  
Evanston, IL 60201 • (847) 492.7400

### Splendido

13500 N. Rancho Vistoso Boulevard  
Tucson, AZ 85755 • (520) 878.2600

### Mather Place of Wilmette

2801 Old Glenview Road  
Wilmette, IL 60091 • (847) 256.9300

### Mather Pavilion

820 Foster Street  
Evanston, IL 60201 • (847) 492.7700

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### Mather's—More Than a Café

7134 W. Higgins Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60656 • (773) 774.4804

3235 N. Central Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60634 • (773) 205.3300

33 E. 83rd Street  
Chicago, IL 60619 • (773) 488.2801

Mather Edgewater  
1020 W. Bryn Mawr Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60660 • (773) 769.0299

### MOREways

[www.MOREways.org](http://www.MOREways.org) • (888) 600.2560

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