

Who Wants to be 100?

Many among us have discovered that the good life can go on and on and on. What are the secrets for staying around and staying healthy longer?

Recently, my wife, Barb, and I visited some friends in their home, which is just over 100 years old. It was well preserved—even immaculate. They had cared for their home lovingly and carefully, and it responded as it had been designed, giving them a comfortable place to live for many decades.

Pastors often talk of our responsibility to be good stewards of our time, talent and treasure. I would add a fourth: our temple. As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (NIV).

It may seem obvious, but one of the secrets to caring for your temple—to becoming and staying highly healthy—is to prevent “dis-ease” not only in your body, but also in your mind, spirit, relationships, community and church, as much as is possible.

God’s divine design for us is for what I call “the four wheels of our health”—physical, emotional, relational and spiritual—to be balanced and in alignment. Doing so simply allows us to travel many more miles.

As a family physician, I rarely saw a patient with a previously preventable medical problem who didn’t wish he or she had expended more time and effort to prevent the problem that was now troubling him or her.

Highly Healthy Centenarians

I spent my first year of medical practice in the Smoky Mountains of rural western North Carolina. There I had the privilege of caring for a number of patients who were in their 90s, and several who were over 100 years old. Caring for these men and women taught me much about what it means to be a highly healthy person who lives to be a centenarian.

Donna had just turned 100 when we first met. "I'm tired of traveling all the way to Sylva to see the internist," she told me during our first appointment. "And," she added, "my doctor over there is so old. I'm afraid he's not going to be around much longer!"

"How old is he?" I asked.

She giggled, putting her hand over her mouth, blushing. "Oh, honey, he's barely 60. He just doesn't know how to live very well. And I think he's working himself into an early grave! If he had just listened to me!"

I smiled to myself. Here was a woman 40 years older than her physician, predicting his death. Barely one month later, I saw his obituary in the newspaper.

Donna had my attention, and over the next four years I listened, and she taught. Hardly a visit went by where she didn't share her wisdom. Here are some of what my office staff called "Donnaisms":

1. When asked why she always seemed so up, never moody or down, even when an illness flared, she exclaimed, "I'm too blessed to be stressed or depressed!"
2. When talking about a local politician who had been accused of an ethical indiscretion, she quipped, "Forbidden fruits create many jams."
3. She told me that she exercised twice as much as most people: "Every day I walk an hour along Deep Creek, and I walk 24 hours with the Lord."

One afternoon I noticed my nurse, Beth, doubled over in laughter as Donna was leaving the office. I had prescribed a mild medication to help her with occasional insomnia. In addition, she also was taking a laxative sporadically for bouts of constipation.

Donna had pointed out to Beth, “Honey, whatever else you do, never, never, under any circumstances, have a patient take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night.” Then she took off out the door to conquer the world.

Living Long, Living Well

Donna had a number of physical and mental ailments, but minor “mechanical” problems aren’t too noticeable in an “older vehicle” that has been well cared for and is otherwise running efficiently. And Donna was running efficiently.

She had a number of similarities with her long-lived friends, as well as with other elderly folks from various cultures who, because of their longevity, have been studied. Leonard W. Poon, the lead researcher in one of the largest studies of centenarians ever conducted, reported that centenarians find meaning in life’s trials and respond effectively to problems. They’re not “wallowers.” And, Donna was certainly no wallower!

Some of the longest long-lived groups of people in the world are said to be among the Georgians of the Caucasus Mountains in southern Russia, the Vilcabamba Indians of the Ecuadorian Andes, the people of the Hunza Valley in Kashmir and residents of Okinawa, Japan. Not only are they long-lived, with significant numbers of individuals exceeding 100 years of age, but medical studies also accent the high quality of life of most of the centenarians in these cultures.

Many of these people would be considered poor by Western standards. Yet they consider themselves wealthy and satisfied.

Ninety percent of American centenarians are functionally independent for the vast majority of their lives—up until the

average age of 92 years. Rather than the incorrect perception that the older you become, the sicker you get, these centenarians teach us that the healthier you've been, the older you get.

Many centenarian women have a history of bearing children after the age of 35 and even 40. A woman who gives birth after the age of 40 has a four times greater chance of living to 100 than women who do not. It's probably not the act of bearing a child in one's 40s that promotes long life, but doing so may be an indicator that the woman's reproductive system is aging slowly and that the rest of her body is just as healthy.

At least 50 percent of centenarians have close relatives or grandparents who lived to a very old age and many have exceptionally old siblings. Male siblings of centenarians have an 11 times greater chance of reaching age 97 than other men born around the same time, and female siblings have an eight and one-half times greater chance of achieving age 100 than other females born around the same time.

I think the most reassuring of the New England Centenarian Study (NECS) findings is that although the centenarians share certain characteristics, they are not all alike. In fact, they have a wide range of different characteristics—their ethnicity, spiritual beliefs, level of education (no formal schooling to postgraduate study); socioeconomic status (very poor to very rich); dietary patterns (strictly vegetarian to extremely rich in saturated fats) and exercise (none to daily).

More Than Good Genes

Researchers tell us that the odds of living to 100 years of age are increasing every year. There are already many thousands of centenarians alive today, and at least half of them are well enough to live independently. There are about 50,000 people over the age of 100 in the United States alone—almost three times as many as there were in 1980.

Are they just blessed in the good genes department? Or is their health due to the way they live? Though scientists continue to debate the factors that are most likely to assist us in becoming centenarians, most now say that long life is not just a result of good genes.

Genes are important, but even more important are the decisions we make about a variety of daily lifestyle issues—eating, sleeping, diet, exercise, work, leisure and our relationships. Some experts believe that as much as 80 percent of what controls how long you or I will live is related to our lifestyle choices, not our genes.

Donna used to share with me one of her favorite quotes. It was from a poem Douglas MacArthur quoted: “You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt; as young as your confidence, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, as old as your despair.”

In Christ, we have faith given to us by the Lord, confidence in Him and His love. We are told to “fear not,” and we have the ultimate and eternal hope that all of our physical aging will one day end. Hallelujah!

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