



Senior Housing and Successful Aging in the 21st Century

Senior services pros empower learning and growing for life

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Walk through the welcoming lobby in a new wellness center in this Minnesota continuing-care retirement community and smell the good coffee.

It's just one of the wake-up calls at *Vitalize!* Wellness Centre, a state-of-the-art development that opened as part of the Ecumen community Parmly LifePointes in

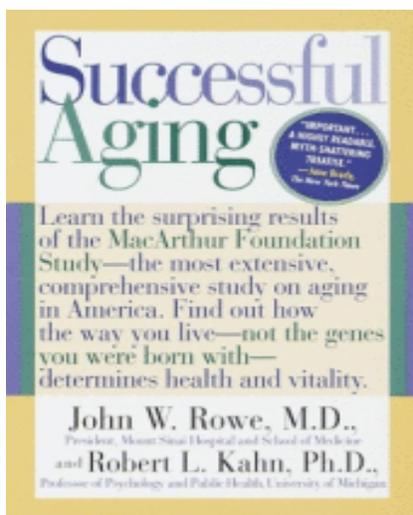


Ruben Berg, swimmer at Ecumen's Parmly LifePointes

Chisago City in November. Take a few more steps to find the inviting coffeehouse and snack bar called Ruben's, named for a 94-year-old resident, and lifetime swimmer who is back in the center's pool after an injury.

Word of Ruben Berg's determined comeback made the rounds at the wellness center, where the warm-water pool, juicing classes and rows of high-tech exercise machines boost a goal of helping

residents to seize personal responsibility for "aging well." Berg is a prime example of that accomplishment, says Patricia Montgomery, the center's director. She defines aging well as "live long, die short."



A 1998 book titled “Successful Aging,” based on results of the groundbreaking MacArthur Foundation Study, taught us the powerful role each of us has in shaping our health and well-being as we age. Our genes determine only 30 percent of our destiny, the book told us. The other 70 percent? That’s up to us.

It means starting earlier in life to exercise both our bodies and our brainpower, eat healthily, avoid smoking and other unhealthy behaviors, remain engaged with people and the world around

us and strive to find meaning and purpose in life. And to stick with that plan as we climb the age ladder.

A decade after the book was published, other studies have confirmed and advanced those findings. So we wanted to ask the experts: **How are we doing with successful aging in America today?**

Most people can recite the wisdom of regular exercise, keeping weight within limits and that smoking is bad for your health, says Robert Kahn, co-author of “Successful Aging” and a career professor of psychology and public health who regularly reports to work in his University of Michigan office at age 90. He sees progress in Americans’ understanding of aging well, he says. But it shows up more in what they know than what they do.

“Problems of obesity are on the increase rather than the decrease,” he points out.

“And I think in the upper age range, you don’t see much in the way of regular exercise,” though he acknowledges the surge of exercise opportunities that retirement communities provide for residents.

The popular press has spread the word that people are living longer, but Kahn says the coverage is too preoccupied with rare individuals. “The 90-year-old



Roger Kahn

marathon runner, for example,” he says, “which is not what most of us can even aspire to be.” He sees too little about why people are living longer and what longer life means, he adds. “Or what a longer and productive and happy life can be.”

He wants to see more information circulated about other findings, too, such as the need to challenge our brains often and in new ways to stay mentally sharp. And he’d like to see more about learning and productivity in older people’s lives and less about leisure. “I think we’ve developed a sort of Sun City idea of what constitutes old age,” he says. He’s dismayed that he doesn’t hear people talking much about changing that.

Kahn rates the state of successful aging as “mixed,” he says. “We now are able to talk a better game than we used to. We need to have our behavior catch up.”

Dr. Roger Landry travels the country to educate audiences about aging well and to promote and train care providers in the how-to of masterpiece living, a plan for successful living inspired by the MacArthur Foundation Study.

“We’ve learned what we need to know” about successful aging, says Landry, who lives in New York and Pennsylvania. “We know what’s possible.” Questions remain about how to make it happen. “One is how to engage older adults. They’re smart people with interesting lives.” But our broader society tends to push them aside. Changing that, he says, would be a “win-win” for people of every age.

Good things are happening. A stereotype of people sitting in a rocking chair until they die is fading, he says. More information is available about benefits of physical exercise and challenging our brainpower to reduce the threat and effects of Alzheimer’s disease. He notices people in airplanes working crossword puzzles and Sudoku. And new resources are continually emerging in the marketplace to challenge the brain, such as [m]Power cognitive fitness technology used by Ecumen.

Understanding of the value of both spirituality and social connectedness is growing, he says. “If we stay in our homes, almost by definition we stay more and

more isolated.” Studies show that isolation heightens the risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, dementia, falling and fractures.

But there is more work to do. “Alzheimer’s disease still terrifies people,” Landry says, and many aren’t aware there are ways to ward it off. And Americans need to replace high levels of stress, which he calls “our national sickness,” with more serenity and soulfulness.

Some communities across the country – and at least one state – are climbing on a bandwagon to help their residents age well. Most notable is the Cleveland (Ohio) Foundation Successful Aging Initiative (<http://www.successfulaging.org>), which is developing a three-year, \$4 million plan to create and maintain elder-friendly communities in the city. Goals include creating lifelong learning and development centers and promoting employment and volunteer opportunities for older people.

In Colorado, a similar project (www.silverprintcolorado.org) is afoot, spearheaded by an independent coalition of individuals, organizations and businesses. Its vision: to establish a culture for positive aging and addressing needs, contributions and opportunities for people age 60-plus.

There’s little doubt that maintaining quality of life until the end is something most people want for themselves and their loved ones. How can we make it happen? And when it does, what does it look like?

Those are questions that senior housing and aging services professionals are working to answer at places such as Ecumen’s Parmly LifePointes where more than 200 people from the larger community have joined *Vitalize!* Wellness Centre to take classes and work out there, many times alongside residents of the nursing home and assisted living.



Water exercise class at Vitalize!

As part of a masterpiece living plan the Parmly staff follows, residents are introduced to six dimensions of wellness – physical, emotional, intellectual, social, vocational and

spiritual, says Mary Cordts, Ecumen regional director and executive director at Ecumen's Parmly LifePointes community, which offers living options from independent apartments to end-of-life care.

Aging well takes many shapes because it's different for everyone, she says. "It's all about changing the way people look at age and focusing on the third part of their lives to make life as fulfilling as possible." The hope is that individuals will hold onto an independent spirit. That can mean living one's passion, whether it's a long-held one, something they've always wanted to try or a new discovery.

"We're really trying to reach in and understand what people's passions are," she says. And then to help them remove barriers. "We can't do it for someone," Cordts says. "They really have to do it for themselves."

A key part of empowering people at Ecumen assisted living and memory care communities is The Ecumen Lifestyle Covenant. It begins as a discussion guide where Ecumen customers explore and focus on what's most important to how they live their life from whether they're an early riser or late sleeper to interests they're passionate about to any apprehensions they have about moving. The focus is learning what is most important to this person's individual lifestyle. At the conclusion, the customer and the Ecumen team members both sign the covenant, agreeing to work to support the lifestyle the person desires.

"The key is you can grow at any stage of your life," Cordts says. "And we honor the people we serve by working with them to empower that reality."

Kay Harvey writes for Eldr Magazine and reports on aging, demographics, gender and psychology for the online newspaper MinnPost.com. She previously was an editor and reporter for the Saint Paul Pioneer Press. Ecumen is the innovative leader of senior housing and services, empowering individuals to live richer and fuller lives.