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Five Ways to Control the Aging Process

By Maddy Dychtwald | January 21, 2015



MADDY DYCHTWALD: What is one element of growing older that has surprised me?

Control. You may think you don't have much, but all of us have more control than we think in terms of our own aging process.

I always assumed I'd grow old like my parents. In fact, after my dad died at age 60 from cancer, both my brother and I worried that we, too, might face the same fate. The fact is that, somewhere in the back of our minds, many of us assume that our genetics are the primary predictor of how well or poorly we will age.

But I've been surprised to learn that our lifestyle and behaviors are now believed to be far more important to how we age than our genes. According to Dr. [John W. Rowe](#), professor at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and director of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on an Aging Society, "Only about 30% of the characteristics of aging are genetically based; the rest—70%—is not."

This new 70/30 rule is a game changer of the highest order. It means we're more in charge of our own aging and health than we ever imagined. Not completely, of course. There are definitely things that are out of our control and more likely to occur as we get older. For instance, you surely wouldn't blame yourself if you were to get cancer, Parkinson's disease, or another disease. However, there is a certain sense of power that comes from knowing there are some practical steps we can each take to control our own aging process a little more and then reap the rewards of a healthy and enjoyable longevity.

Here are a few suggestions:

Stay physically active. We've heard this a million times, however, the message is even more potent for older adults. People who begin exercising in their 60s or 70s are three times more likely than those who don't exercise to age healthfully and not develop a major chronic disease, depression, or physical or cognitive impairment.

Eat real food. A nutritious diet can improve heart health; fortify bones; and reduce the risk of stroke, Type 2 diabetes, and cancer. And maintaining a healthy weight is part of the package. A rule of thumb is to eat whole rather than processed foods.

Stay socially connected. Ultimately it's the people we love and who love us that matter most. Engaging regularly with family and friends has been proven to add years to each of our lives and make those years feel more fulfilling. In addition, taking part in activities that connect us with younger generations and give us a sense of purpose are potent for staving off the aging process.

Develop positive resiliency. Learning how to bounce back from loss, disappointment, and setbacks is a practical skill we can all endeavor to develop. Seeing the glass half full rather than half empty is something that might sound simplistic but can improve our lives and our health.

Train your brain. The brain is also a muscle that needs a regular workout. Taking classes, trying new things, and exposing ourselves to new ideas all contribute to mental fitness. And there are many online brain workout programs that are fun and stimulating, available at no or low cost.

So remember: you can't control everything about your aging process, but you probably have more control than you thought.

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