

Chapter 86

U3A Online and Successful Aging: A Smart Way to Help Bridge the Grey Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

Population aging is refocusing aging policy away from mainly remedial actions towards low cost preventative interventions that keep older people independent and participating in their communities for longer. The purpose of this chapter is 3-fold: 1) to outline the elements of the successful aging model; 2) to explain the worldwide, self-help University of the Third Age (U3A) adult education program as a very low cost, successful aging organization; and 3) to discuss findings from two related studies of older adults who were members of a virtual U3A called U3A Online. Considerable anecdotal evidence shows that U3A Online is particularly valuable for people who are isolated from their mainstream communities by circumstances such as illness, disability or care giving. An email focus group with nine participants from three countries was conducted over a two year period, using the successful aging model as a guideline to examine the characteristics of these older people who are attracted to online learning. Results based on the combination of automated computer text analysis and manual text analysis techniques supported a conclusion that the Internet was an integral part of the lives of these participants, particularly those with serious health difficulties or profound hearing loss. Outcomes also supported a conclusion that electronic communication can reduce feelings of isolation and provide stimulating and enjoyable pastimes with the potential to assist older people in aging successfully.

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INTRODUCTION

Faced with a burgeoning aging population, governments in many countries are seeking creative ways for maximizing returns from relatively declining budgets and stretched social support services for the elderly. Inevitably the emphasis has swung from expensive, later life medical heroics to an approach that places increasing onus on aging individuals to take more responsibility for their own aging. Preventative rather than remedial interventions have become the major goal for addressing myriad social and economic challenges that accompany population aging.

Old machines wear out. However, with regular maintenance and timely expert mechanical intervention, old machines can continue reliably carrying out their designated functions for years. Something similar applies to older human machines. It seems that if people choose to adopt a few sensible lifestyle habits then they stand the best chance of maximizing their own longevity and independence. The key word in this is “choose”. By choosing to follow a regular self-maintenance program throughout its life, the aging human machine is better able to carry on successfully to a ripe old age with far less reliance on expensive medical intervention needed to get it back on the road.

In this chapter, we first describe the successful aging framework and discuss its components and benefits. We then present information on organizations aimed to promote successful aging, with a particular focus on those that promote learning in older age with a goal of delaying cognitive decline and capitalizing on older citizens’ cognitive resources. We then describe two related studies conducted with older participants in an online life-long learning program called U3A Online. These findings are discussed in light of the successful aging framework.

BACKGROUND

Successful Aging

During the past two decades many studies have been carried out in an attempt to determine why some people in their 80s, 90s and older continue to engage optimistically and independently with everyday life, whereas others who are younger have already lost their independence. Successful aging, aging well, productive aging, active aging, healthy aging, and positive aging are among a number of closely related, evidence-based models that differ from each other in emphasis rather than absolute content (Friedrich, 2003). Regardless of which model is emphasized, each is about a quite small number of choices that older people should follow if they are to maintain a sense of control over their environment while balancing the gains and losses in later life.

The MacArthur Foundation Study of Successful Aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1999) illustrates the substantial gains in understanding of aging that can flow from a large, interdisciplinary research approach. The study, which was actually a coherent set of dozens of individual research projects led by 16 researchers from across the broad spectrum of gerontology, was the most extensive and comprehensive multidisciplinary study on aging in America. The successful aging model, which was an outcome of the collective findings, outlines three fundamental attributes of a successfully aging individual:

- low risk of disease and disease-related disability;
- high mental and physical function;
- active engagement with life.

Each of the three components of the model is important in itself. However they may be somewhat hierarchical in that the absence of disease and disability may make it easier to maintain mental and physical function. This in turn may enable, but not guarantee, engagement with life.

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