

The Secret to Successful Aging:

EXCERPTS FROM A TEDx TALK BY CATHLEEN TOOMEY

Want to know the secret to successful aging? It's not Botox, or kale, or even sudoku. You don't have to buy it, be born with it, or borrow your life savings to get it.

In order to understand how to successfully age, it's important to understand what is different about today's older adults, compared with prior generations.

First, we are living much longer than prior generations – today, statistically, if you live to 65, you will live to 84, and if you make it to 84, you will live to 92. We are benefiting from the best medical care of any prior generation.

Second, there are many more retirees than ever before – we are on the cusp of what some people call a “silver tsunami.” Every day in the U.S.,



All Photos Courtesy of RiverWoods Exeter

10,000 people turn 70 – and that will continue for the next 18 years. It is a phenomenon this country has never

experienced since its founding.

Third, the retirees of today have higher expectations of their lives –

they are interested in embarking on third chapters, new phases of life, cultivating a new iteration of a career or a “side hustle” job. They are traveling more, and, thanks to modern medicine, are no longer slowed down by a new knee or a new hip – they recuperate and continue with their active lifestyle.

So, if our retirees are more active and generally healthier and are living longer than prior generations, why do all the birthday cards over age 40 foretell doom and gloom? Why do we not welcome aging? Certainly, it is better than the alternative, right?

“Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.”

We could blame society's obsession with youth, but I think it comes down to fear. Many see and experience being older as an advent of losses: loss of physical vitality, energy, and friends, and in some cases, a loss of purpose. And certainly, aging does bring a host of what poet Donald Hall calls “a carnival of losses” – but isn't there another way to look at this?

Two studies I have discovered present alternative views. Harvard University did a significant longitudinal study following a cohort of graduates over 75 years to discover the keys to happy and healthy aging. What are the indicators – health,



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education, diet, career success, marital happiness, spiritual practice, money? Shockingly, the editors boiled it down to one sentence: “Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.” Author Dan Buettner examined longevity globally and identified five areas — or “Blue Zones” — around

the world where the longest-living people were clustered. He identified key attributes these people shared, across vastly different cultures. One attribute they all shared (among others) was a strong sense of purpose; what the Japanese call ikigai — loosely translated as “a reason to

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get up in the morning.”

Those seniors who have discovered their ikigai in this phase of their life – those adults who know they are not yet done giving back, sharing wisdom, learning — thrive as they age, despite what comes their way. When you are working or raising a family, it's easy to find your ikigai, your purpose. But when your family is grown, and your career is over, it doesn't mean your life is over — now is the time to discover your next purpose.

It's that simple. The secret to successful aging? Cultivate relationships with others and you're your new purpose. The world is hungry for your knowledge, your gifts, your talent. You are not yet done.

Cathleen Toomey is Vice President of Marketing for The RiverWoods Group, the parent organization of three Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRC) in NH. Cathleen has more than 30 years in marketing, building consumer brands such as Timberland and Stonyfield Farm, and non-profits like Babson College, Bentley University and University of New Hampshire. A graduate of Fordham College (MA) and Fairfield University (BA) she started her career in advertising in New York City. She has directed the sales and marketing efforts for RiverWoods for the past 11 years, and is a past TEDx speaker on aging. She has delivered more than 25 educational programs across the country for financial and legal professionals on the topic of CCRCs. The RiverWoods Group is comprised of RiverWoods Exeter (CCRC), which opened in Exeter, NH, in 1994; Birch Hill (CCRC) in Manchester, NH, which, in 2016, became the first affiliate of The RiverWoods Group outside of three campuses in Exeter, NH; and the most recent TRWG community, RiverWoods Durham (CCRC), which is scheduled to open in Durham, NH, in late fall of 2019.

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