Seven Secrets to Aging Well
by Lilly Tryon, MSN, RN

We’re living longer these days. But in spite of the fact that the number of years we live is increasing, there appears to be a big difference in the quality of life among the elderly. We want to look good, feel good, and be able to function independently for as long as we can. We spend billions of dollars every year in an effort to slow down or even disguise the effects of aging. Yet in spite of this quest, nearly two-thirds of Americans are overweight, out of shape, and suffering from chronic disease—setting the stage for a debilitating existence in our later years.

So how do you age well? Anthropologists, epidemiologists and aging specialists around the world are finding that we have far more control over the aging process than we once thought. Yes, our genes contribute to how long we live and how well we age. But they only account for about 30 percent. The rest is pure lifestyle.

Dan Buettner, an explorer with National Geographic who has traveled widely studying longevity, wrote about what he calls “Blue Zones.” In these Blue Zones (Sardinia, Italy; Ikaria, Greece; Nicoya, Costa Rica; Okinawa, Japan; Loma Linda, California), he observed the lifestyle habits of people who reach age 100 at rates 10 times greater than in the United States. They also suffered a fraction of the rate of heart disease and cancer. Interestingly, a peak into the lives of these centenarians reveals that their secrets to aging well are not secrets at all, but steps we can

and connections and manufacture neurotrophins that strengthen our brain cells and protect against cognitive decline. Think of your brain as a muscle, and find opportunities to flex it!

**7. How well do I bounce back?**

Researchers have identified positivity and resilience as keys to successful aging. Among many notable findings has been a study of handwritten autobiographies from 180 nuns, written when they were young women. The writings were scored for emotional content and compared with survival rates from the age of 75 to 95. Consistently, the nuns who aged well were those who wrote with the most positive attitude. In fact, they were 2½ times more likely to be alive in late life than the sisters who had a more negative point of view at a young age. Life is unpredictable and often doesn’t turn out as we’d planned. But having a positive attitude can help us to bounce back from adversity instead of getting knocked off our feet, as well as protect against mental decline, disease and mortality.

Whatever your age, it’s never too soon, or too late, to learn and apply the secrets of aging well. God tells us in Deuteronomy 30:19: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.”

You’re going to age anyway. Why not age well?

**Suggested Resources for Aging Well:**

2. The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who’ve Lived the Longest, by Dan Buettner. www.bluezones.com

Lilly Tryon, MSN, RN is founder of Keys to Living Well (www.keys2livingwell.com), a lifestyle coaching site designed to inspire, empower and support you in your efforts to live (and age) well, and creator of Coaching Lasting Lifestyle Change, a faith-based lifestyle coach training program. She also serves as wellness coach and health ministries coordinator for Adventist WholeHealth Network in Wyomissing, PA.
each take for a longer, healthier life. To help you take note of how well you are aging, here are seven questions to consider.

1. **Am I taking personal responsibility for aging well?**
   Perhaps the biggest secret to longevity lies in what the centenarians didn’t say. What we don’t hear is, “Oh, it was an accident, really. Everything just sort of worked out for me to live a long, healthy life.” We want to feel better, to have more energy, look better in our clothes, lower our health risks, and age well. But how are those desires reflected in our day-to-day decisions? Taking personal responsibility means to count the cost, choose to live healthfully, and ask ourselves every day, What will I do today that will take me one step closer to aging well?

2. **Do I follow the basics for good health?**
   I mean, really follow them? The lifestyles that centenarians advocate include basic health habits we have known for years: eat wisely, be physically active, stay connected to others, live temperately, express gratitude, enjoy a trusting relationship with God. But the Center for Advancing Health recently reviewed 31 national surveys conducted from 2001-2009 and found that Americans do not actively and consistently perform many of the actions directly linked to improving our health. Their report, A Snapshot of People’s Engagement in Their Health Care, states that when it comes to managing health, people tend to be more reactive than proactive. In one 2009 survey, 90 percent said “they would become active in improving their health if they were diagnosed with a chronic illness.” By then, it might be too late.

3. **How well am I coping with daily stress?**
   Simply taking care of ourselves physically isn’t enough. Increasingly, researchers are viewing stress – the levels of stress we face as well as how we cope with it – as one of the most significant factors for predicting how well we age. Everyone experiences normal day-to-day stress, but the healthiest agers are particularly skilled at coping with stress. How’s the pace of your life? Do you “live to work” or “work to live?” How well do you create space in your life to pause, relax and recharge? Where are the healthy boundaries essential to your health and wellness?

4. **Do I create an environment of health?**
   Our decisions are strongly influenced by cultural norms, marketing messages, and environmental cues. Although we have little control over the billboards we see as we drive to work, we can make certain changes in our homes to promote health. Inventory your home. Is there a television in every room, promoting sedentary activity? What foods and beverages are visible and easily accessible? Do you routinely eat together as a family? Another secret for aging well is to follow the example of the world’s longest-lived people and create environments of health.

5. **How connected am I?**
   Successful agers are not loners. In our pursuit of aging well, we mustn’t overlook a powerful weapon that can help us fight illness and depression, lower our risk for disease, speed recovery, slow aging and prolong life: our relationships. People who age well tend to be close to extended family and have a strong network of friends and social relationships. God created us for community, to function at our best in the nourishing companionship of others. Having strong social connections increases the likelihood that we will get out more, eat better, have a stronger sense of purpose, and remain more mentally alert than people who are more isolated.

6. **How often do I exercise my brain?**
   God created our brains to need mental stimulation throughout life for peak brain function and fighting the effects of mental aging. To keep mentally fit, we need to keep thinking and learning! Neuroscience researchers have found that this type of stimulation helps your brain activate underused nerve pathways