Smile, and be happy: K-State specialist shares tips for healthy aging

Yelland says looking for positives helps in maintaining health as people get older

MANHATTAN, Kan. – A smile or words of encouragement may seem like small things, but Erin Yelland knows they add up.

“We know from research that having a positive outlook on aging actually adds 7 ½ years to your life,” said Yelland, a specialist on aging with K-State Research and Extension. “If you have that positive outlook, you’re able to embrace aging and look for the positives. And it’s going to add years to your life.”

Yelland, in fact, has come up with an acronym that supports her belief that living with positivity is the healthy path for most. The acronym is SMILE BIG.

- **Successful aging requires practicing positivity.** “If we have a positive attitude, we are more likely to make changes and implement healthy behaviors into our lives that are going to help us be successful as we age.”

- **Manage our expectations.** “We are not always going to be at the pinnacle of healthy aging, and that’s okay. We need to make our expectations something that are attainable.”

- **Interact with positivity.** “Research shows that when you interact with positive people and places, you’re more likely to embrace positivity as well.”

- **Looking for positives.** “We know that bad things happen sometimes, but when you take the time to truly reflect, I bet you’ll find something positive that came from the situation. Thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to stay home more and make more meaningful connections with our family members.”

- **Escaping ageism.** “Make it a priority to escape stereotypes associated with aging. Your age does not define who you are.”
• **Being healthy.** “We know that there are a lot of healthy behaviors that we should be doing, but we don’t always do them. Eating healthfully, exercising regularly, taking care of our brain…all of those things lead to successful aging.”

• **‘I Can’ approach.** “Instead of saying, ‘I can’t do this or that anymore,’ take the ‘I Can’ approach. For example, ‘I can utilize a cane that will help me move around more safely…”’

• **Give yourself grace.** “Sometimes we’re going to mess up or have a bad day. We need to give ourselves grace so we’re not beating ourselves down when we don’t always embrace positivity. It is okay to not be okay.”

“One of the things I heard when I was young was that older adults are supposed to have gray hair, sit in a rocking chair, knit and stay home…” Yelland said. “That’s really quite the opposite of what older adults are able to do. Many are able to stay active and engaged and not fall into the stereotypical mindset that older adults are supposed to be sedentary and stuck at home.”

Yelland said K-State Research and Extension agents across Kansas are working to help older adults remain independent, exercise and maintain their living spaces in ways that help them remain healthy.

A couple key resources include:

• **Simple Home Modification for Aging in Place.** This publication outlines free or low-cost changes to make the home a safer place to live. Some of the modifications include removing such trip hazards as rugs; installing grab bars and sturdy handrails; moving frequently used items to lower shelves in the kitchen; and arranging furniture strategically to reduce hazards.

• **Keys to Embracing Aging.** This program outlines 12 ways to healthy living, physical activity, healthy eating, brain health, staying social and taking care of finances, among other topics.

“We do a lot of community-based education on healthy aging, and how to support caregivers, and how we can embrace aspects of positive aging,” Yelland said. “We are also doing work in communities to help make sure that older adults are considered when we are creating policies and practices in our communities.”

“Extension really values the lives of older adults and the big and important roles that they play in our lives and our communities. We’re working to enhance that and make sure that older adults are not the throw-away generation.”

For more information and guidance on aging well, contact your local extension office.
FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Keys to Embracing Aging, https://www.aging.k-state.edu/programs/embracing-aging/embracing-aging.html
K-State Research and Extension local offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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