

Later Life Learning - Sustaining Wellbeing



Before U3A

When you woke this morning you did so to a 29 hr day - your normal allocation of 24 hrs plus 5 hours gained from your increased life expectancy. Tomorrow will be the same and the day after so that by the end of the year your life expectancy will have increased by 70 days i.e., one year in every five.

We are all living longer because of improved socio-economic conditions, better nutrition and education, advances in medical care (vaccines, antibiotics, medical technology etc) and good public health laws.

But what is the good of all these extra years if they are characterised by decline, disability, disease and dependency? What most people want is to live long, live well, die quickly and have no need of health or social services! Is this too much to hope for? Is there any action we can take that will arrest or at least retard decline? Can we re-invent retirement so that it is characterised by "wellbeing" - a proactive sustainable condition that is far more than just the absence of sickness, but which consists of vitality, happiness, creativity and fulfilment. Far more than just getting by.

The World Health Organisation encourages "active ageing" which it defines as the "continuing participation in social, economic, cultural and civic affairs". The U.K. Government in at least two publications suggests that, as people move to old age, learning for leisure in later life should be encouraged to protect against cognitive decline (Foresight Report on Mental Capital 2008). The Government White Paper on "Learning for Leisure" (2009) can maintain mental and physical health and contribute to a person's wellbeing. "To keep learning is one of the ways of maintaining wellbeing, building confidence and resilience, whilst the social relationship that develops in the learning situation provides a network of support and solidarity".

The many courses, programmes and events delivered by the local U3A address the main issues:

- mental wellbeing - "use it or lose it" is not just an aphorism but an established scientific fact.
- physical wellbeing - "what's good for the heart is good for the head as well".
- social connectivity - staying connected to other members and making new friends counteracts the dreaded scourge of loneliness,
- volunteering - using your acumen and pre-retirement experience as a volunteer sustains your self worth and self efficacy.

Of course sustaining wellbeing in later life depends on attention to many other factors - diet, sleep, laughter (lowers your cholesterol and blood pressure), reminiscing (putting yourself at the centre of the story and stimulating your self worth), spirituality, managing stress etc. We cannot do much about the life limiting effects of our chromosomes, but life style and U3A can do much to defer decline.

Aughton-Ormskirk U3A offers over 100 courses and events each month in addition to holidays, external visits to music and theatre concerts encouraging social engagement and friendships all of which maintain and enhance the physical and mental health of older people. Research suggests that social factors including enjoyment with life, social relationship and productive activity are more important than biological and genetic factors for healthy ageing.

Whilst the evidence base of the benefits might not be understood, the anecdotal evidence from our members of the benefits of U3A involvement is overwhelming. U3A is not yet on prescription but "U3A Three Times a Day" is the recommended dose of many health professionals.



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Founding Chairman

Acknowledgements for use of diagram - Prof. Felicia Huppert, Dept of Clinical Psychology, University of Cambridge.