

Mental Fitness

PLANNING TO PUT MORE LIFE INTO LONGEVITY

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Just think: if I ran every day, I could probably add 10 years to my life! Then again, I probably would be spending 9 of them running. Hmmm...

As we face the prospect of living longer, our perspective about what is important is bound to change also. Issues of quality of life, meaning, purpose, fulfillment, legacy, and transition to an afterlife are now more than mere intellectual topics. They now assume a place of prominence in our thinking and planning.

Health and fitness. Fortunately, the majority of Impact readers have made a personal choice long ago to honor our physical bodies and our mental health with regular workouts and active lifestyles. We have also designed a good part of our social and community lives around support and interest groups for these sports. In later years we will continue to enjoy the dividends of our current active lifestyle investments.

Quality of life. Health is only one aspect of wealth. Wealth is not merely financial security or the access that money can provide; it is the time, energy, attitude, relationships, and resources to enjoy our lives sustainably. (Most of us know at least one elderly person whose quality of life is impaired by poverty, poor health, social isolation, or a bitter disposition or attitude.) These mental and emotional resources determine our quality of life, both now and in the future. Given their importance, it is amazing that some

people neglect the building and maintaining of these assets (e.g., financial planning) in early and mid-life.

Meaning and purpose. Our purpose or life mission determines our sense of a life lived meaningfully and passionately. While it is possible to live without a definite sense of identity and purpose, there is often no sense of being on a path or journey, no sense of development and growth or enjoyment. Especially when we hit speed bumps or temporary obstacles on our life path, or when major losses occur, lack of a life mission can render us more vulnerable to these events, and shake our faith in the meaning of life. If you haven't already done so, it is likely a good idea to work with a friend or a personal consultant to explore the creation of a personal or family mission statement that could include some aspect of spirituality.

Fulfillment. Our lives are usually too busy to allow many opportunities for personal fulfillment. That is, meeting our obligations to our colleagues, families, friends, and associates while we pursue personal and financial goals can consume a great amount of time and energy. Thankfully, many of us find fulfillment in our careers, family relationships, and usual friendship circles and activities. Also, during the course of a lifetime, we now can experience the refreshment of multiple career paths, family roles and configurations, and lifestyle options.

Still, we often think wistfully how nice it would be to have the time and resources to do something really different, like play a musical instrument, explore foreign cultures, take an art course, go on a safari, etc. When it comes to quality, life's too short to keep postponing these dreams of personal enjoyment. Perhaps it may require only a partial exploration of this different activity, because that is all your resources will allow. The point is: begin it now! Don't wait until it's too late! Another bonus in starting this project now is that you may find out that this activity or project in reality is not as attractive as you thought it was. If so, you are now free to let it go: "been there, done that." Your energy and desire are now freed up to pursue other dreams. If you can, sample a bit of every activity or interest you are currently postponing. Cultivate desire, and the patience to indulge it in a limited way for now, until adequate time presents itself.

Legacy. In the life we live we are constantly writing a story of our identity, and ultimately, the legacy we leave is the continuation of stories, memories, values, and principles by which we are known and cherished (or ridiculed and reviled). Our karma is the result of the choices we make. One of the best choices we can make is time for fun and frivolity on the path of purpose.

Transition through death. Death is the point of ultimate encounter with our relationship to our spirituality. Given that our population is aging, it is remarkable that membership and attendance in organized religions have not increased proportionately. It seems that for a sizable minority in our secular society, religion does not provide the chosen path to spirituality. Whatever your concept of God or the afterlife, our journey in this life will end. At that moment the preparation we do now in our spiritual practices (meditation, mindfulness, awareness, church attendance, good works in humanitarian causes) will assist us in a smooth transition through this threshold to whatever awaits us.

Attitude. Some guidelines for putting more life into living can be derived from Zen principles that are also seen in traditional religions as well. Although pain is inevitable, suffering (being upset) is optional. The origin of all pain is attachment to desire, or the insistence on a specific outcome, rather than enjoyment of the process. Love what you already have. Practice the Golden Rule. Let our best attitude be our gratitude. These and other precepts of philosophy shape our enjoyment of living.

Time expands and contracts. As we age, a paradox of time distortion occurs. Because we learn increasingly to celebrate the sacredness of every moment, our microview of time becomes enlarged. Also, especially in retirement, we actually have more time to devote to activities and topics we enjoy, without the clutter of competing duties. However, a reversed trend occurs in our macroview perception of time. Life is experienced slightly differently when we estimate that there may only be 20 more Christmases, maybe 10 more extended visits with certain distant friends and relatives. Saying the words unspoken, working through the unfinished emotional issues, and connecting with and expressing the love we feel, allows us to clear the path to personal peace.

Now. As longevity expands, our time for daily preparation for its arrival and enjoyment moves us back here to the Eternal Now. Longevity starts today. Know thyself. Now thyself.