



Staying sharp: Mental acuity does not have to decline with age

Maintaining Good Mental Health Vital as We Age

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It is probably safe to say that the Baby Boom generation, the first wave of which is just now contemplating senior citizenship, will follow the words that poet Dylan Thomas wrote to his dying father: "Do not go gentle into that good night."

But raging against the dying of the light, as Thomas urged his father to do, is going to mean "a significant shift in the paradigm about what it means to get older in this culture," said Kathy Elpers, associate professor of social work at University of Southern Indiana.

Aging in our culture historically has meant decline. Turning 65 and retiring has signaled the end of a productive life — of being "put out to pasture," said Elpers, who teaches courses in gerontology at USI.

But people are living longer now, she said: Turning 65, retiring and signing up for Social Security and Medicare are not the beginning of the end.

A Boomer herself, Elpers said, "Getting older is not a bad thing ... as we age we can continue to learn, continue to develop intergenerational relationships ... we can expand ... gain in wisdom."

Growing old gracefully, in good physical health, is important, but so is maintaining good mental health, intellectual strength and acuity, said Jennifer Schuetter-Bromm, a staff therapist at Southwestern Behavioral Healthcare Inc. in Evansville.

To a great extent, the two go hand in hand.

It goes without saying that lifestyle issues such as smoking, drinking and

recreational drug use should be eliminated or at least limited. So should consumption of junk food.

A nutritionally sound diet rich in Omega 3 fatty acids and antioxidants is important, Schuetter-Bromm said, "And drink more water; it can help you stay focused."

The two most critical things that negatively impact mental health as people age are stress and depression, she said. "Stress-reducing strategies include exercise; short brisk walks are great."

Meditation is a good habit to develop to alleviate stress. Listening to music is too, she said, "And writing (creative writing or journaling) can help you organize your thoughts."

Brain exercises — crossword puzzles, games and the like — "are like fitness workouts (for your mind)," Schuetter-Bromm said.

Schuetter-Bromm said sites like www.happyneurons.com have games and "brain teasers" users can download.

"Our brains are more plastic than we thought ... studies are showing you can increase your neurons, increase neuropathways ... improve cognitive function. ... It's just like toning your muscles."

Good mental health as we age also includes developing new hobbies, attending lectures or group discussions ... anything thought-provoking ... "be open to new ideas ... your outlook has a big impact on your mental health," Schuetter-Bromm said.

"And developing and maintaining social relationships is critical."

Most important, she said, is to stop thinking that dementia is part of the aging process.

"Senility is not normal."