

Healthy Aging and the Holidays: UC San Diego Researchers' Tips

December 4, 2008

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The University of California, San Diego's Stein Institute for Research on Aging - which celebrates its 25th Anniversary this year - focuses on "healthy aging." As some say, 70 is now "the new 50" - and the coming New Year is a great time to take steps to remain cognitively and emotionally healthy.

Specialists in senior medicine at the Stein Institute for Research on Aging at UC San Diego School of Medicine offer some simple tips:

Stay connected. Social connectedness is especially important at holiday times and is a critical component of "healthy aging." "Reaching out to older relatives and friends who are alone is something all of us should do," said Dilip Jeste, M.D., distinguished professor of psychiatry and neurosciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine and director of UCSD's Stein Institute for Research on Aging. "Researchers have also discovered that keeping in touch with friends and continuing to sustain emotional support systems - even with distant friends and relatives who live far away - is an important element of retaining a positive outlook on life." He added that older adults who maintain regular contact with loved ones report that they are "aging successfully" - even in the presence of factors such as illness, loss of a spouse, or moving into a retirement home. "Take a few minutes to pick up the phone, or write a letter," Jeste suggests.

Give of yourself. Volunteer activities aren't just for the young. "We find that seniors who stay active, either by remaining in the work force past traditional retirement age, or by staying involved in their community through volunteerism, also report feeling that they are aging successfully," Jeste said. What better time to start volunteering than the holiday season?

Make time for memories. Holidays provoke memories, which can be especially powerful in the later years of life. "Leading authorities have observed that memory and 'life review' are important parts of the healthy aging process," said Barry Lebowitz, Ph.D., deputy director of UCSD's Stein Institute for Research on Aging. "Even those whose memories are impaired may have difficulty remembering recent events, but they are often able to share stories and observations from the past. These shared memories are important for the young as well - children enjoy hearing about how it was 'when your parents were your age.'" He suggests using picture albums, family videos and music, even theme songs from old radio or TV programs, to help stimulate this sharing process.

Let sunshine into your life. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) or winter depression is a feeling of sadness that can be provoked by reductions in sunlight during the short days of winter. It is important for people confined indoors, especially those at risk for winter depression, to make time for activities that will increase exposure to daylight, according to Lebowitz.

Share the gift of wisdom. With age comes wisdom, along with emotional stability, self-knowledge and compassion - attributes gained from a lifetime of experiences, according to Jeste. "Wisdom may be the greatest gift that seniors can offer younger generations. It is an important contributor to successful personal and social functioning, and a resource from which society as a whole can benefit."

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