

Maintaining Vitality is Six Simple Steps Away

The mind can be a powerful thing when it comes to changing your life.

by Erin Wiley
Community Contributor



Erin Wiley, licensed counselor.
Photo courtesy of Erin Wiley

I recently had the opportunity to attend a Bob Seger concert in downtown Toledo. My husband had asked me to go, and though I wasn't particularly interested, I played the part of the dutiful wife and accompanied him. I have to admit it: I was pleasantly surprised.

I recognized more songs than I thought I would, but moreover was really impressed by the energy with which Seger executed his

show. At 67, he's significantly older than when he started playing for audiences nearly 50 years ago. Yet he was rockin' it out like he was a college kid: fists pumping in the air, having a blast singing and strumming along with his 15-piece band for nearly two hours! Where does that kind of vibrancy come from? Genetics? Luck? A deal with the Devil? Fortunately, a team of researchers at The Mayo Clinic has come up with some suggestions for those of us looking to improve our chances of maintaining the vitality of our youth as we pass through the "second half" of life. As a mental health professional I was particularly interested in the fact that three out of the six suggestions involve the power of the mind.

1 — Exercise. Well, no surprise there, right? We hear it every day on the news, from our physicians and read it in the paper. Exercise is not good for you, it's great. In addition to lowering blood pressure and cholesterol, relieving stress and helping you maintain a healthy weight, regular, moderate exercise can improve your balance and coordination, and can strengthen your muscles, which in turn strengthens your bones. Preventing or reversing the aging effects of diabetes, heart disease and osteoporosis are as easy as lacing up those sneakers and taking a brisk walk two to three times each week.

2 — Diet. Don't act like you're surprised. Eating foods rich in antioxidants and fiber, like leafy greens veggies and berries, can keep your heart strong, your colon healthy and inflammation of the blood vessels low. Stay away from white flour, sugar, from excess salt and animal fats. Focus on lean protein like beans, nuts, fish; fruits and vegetables; and healthy fats like those found in avocados, coconuts and olives.

3 — Regular doctor's visits. Going in for a yearly physical is a great way to catch things like heart disease or cancer while they are still manageable. Check in with your primary care physician and have a blood work up done if it's been awhile. Don't wait until you are sick to see your family doctor.

4 — Brain challenges. Sudoku, crossword puzzles, brainteasers and Scrabble keep mental connections sharp. To stretch your brainpower even further, try learning something new. Maybe now's the time to learn to play a musical instrument or speak a foreign language; perhaps try a computer programming course or a cooking class. Commit to life-long learning: school is never out for those interested in staying young.

5 — Social connections. Last month I discussed the importance of building a social support network and how to make it happen. Family, friends, coworkers, clergy ... from an "inner circle" to those on the periphery, surrounding ourselves with people who support, understand and love us is a great way to insure our health and happiness. Whether we are helping others, or they are helping us, relationships enliven us. Positive interactions with others bolster us against isolation and sadness ... two things that could steal your joy and energy.

6 — Optimistic attitude. My patients usually see me because something in their life is making them unhappy. People just want to be happy. Take one look at a bookstore's shelves and you'll see that authors have it figured out: there are now hundreds of books on the market covering the topic of happiness. One of the simplest things we can do to be happier is to change our attitude. It's technically the thoughts we have about situations and people that lead us to feeling anger or sadness, not the situations or people themselves. Purposefully changing our perspective of a situation takes commitment and practice, but is a powerful tool in remaining positive. Becoming more optimistic entails becoming aware of our automatic thoughts, challenging the negative ones and replacing them with positive thoughts. Happy people may not necessarily live longer, but they will have a higher quality of life than those who choose to remain bitter, miserable or depressed. Not sure how to change your attitude? Seeing a therapist can help.

We may not have the opportunity to get on a stage and rock it out in front of thousands of adoring fans, but in our own way, I believe we all have the desire to be as vibrant as we can, as often as we can, and for as long as we can. Hopefully, you can incorporate some of these ideas as you move toward greater happiness and better health and vitality.

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