

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY AND AGING

By Michele Hendrix

The aging process, our journey and experiences while moving into and through the many different phases of later life has an effect on our life expectancy, our strength, our health, our emotions, and our spiritual life. Too often we encounter these experiences as roadblocks or detours rather than treating the process of aging as an opportunity for inner transformation. Our early and middle adult years do not adequately prepare us for the new role of being an older adult.

Shifting out of the role we are groomed for (work, family, etc.) and into the unfamiliar role of retiree and then healthy aging or elderly person can be a challenging transition. This may, at times, produce feelings of apprehension and concern in the ongoing adventure of living a full and complete life. For many, the focus on production and accomplishments held throughout young adulthood and middle age gives way in later years to a concentration on the interior life, and it places the emphasis on making spiritual connections grow.

Spiritual experiences are those events in life and moments in relationships that attune us to that vital or animating force within and which give greater meaning and depth to our day-to-day living. Research shows that people with an active involvement in church or spiritual community live, on average, seven years longer than those who don't. As the increasing population of older adults continues, I wonder why we are not increasing the role of our elders in our communities, churches, denominations, and society? These relationships should be encouraged as an opportunity to enrich and give meaning to the lives of our aging citizens who have a wealth of wisdom and life experience to contribute and pass forward.

For many, spirituality is key to a vital old age. Staying centered in our faith as everything is changing through advancing age, chronic illness, or deteriorating health makes accepting these changes a little easier. Having this faith - trust without reservation – makes it easier to live with the unknown and face the ups and downs of life as we are aging. The process of aging at every life stage brings about changes in one's spiritual life.

Change is inevitable, continuous, and unavoidable. Everything changes. We may not be in control of situations around us, but we are in control of our reaction towards them. A spiritual perspective on aging is not just for personal transformation; it is a medicine for longevity and health.

Spirituality is difficult to define and describe. It is a concept that is highly personal, often private, and hard to put into words. For most, spirituality is an inward experience. Our spiritual practices (meditating, walking a prayer circle, making a pilgrimage, taking sacraments, singing with a choir, going to a retreat, saying daily prayers, etc.) are just some examples undertaken by many of us in our daily lives. What they have in common is that they assimilate different aspects of our experiences while connecting us with others who share similar beliefs and seek out these experiences.

Our spiritual practices offer us a sacred time; a time we set apart from the everyday rush of our lives on a daily or weekly basis. Spiritual and religious practices have their own inherent value and are sufficient as ends unto them and can contribute positively to living healthier, happier lives.

We should be able to enjoy our spirituality and aging; it is our just reward, which comes from gaining wisdom, insight, and experiences on the aging journey. Spirituality doesn't stop the aging process but it will provide hope, and hope will strengthen your spirit and your faith. It will help us spiritually to cope with whatever may come our way.

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