

Being ‘creative’ and ‘open’ boosts wellbeing in later life

Age UK’s Wellbeing Index finds that age isn’t a barrier to living well

The Wellbeing in Later Life Index, developed by Age UK and the University of Southampton, analysed data from 15,000 people aged 60 and over to measure the wellbeing of the UK’s older population.

It looked at how people were doing in different aspects of their lives under five key areas – social, personal, health, financial and environmental.

Overall it showed there is no ‘magic bullet’ for positive wellbeing in later life and that instead, a whole host of factors under each of the key areas play a part in contributing to a person’s overall sense of wellbeing.

Being creative boosts wellbeing in later life

Factors which were found to have a bigger influence in improving peoples’ wellbeing than many people might suppose included:

- Having an open personality and being willing to try out new things,
- Being physically active;
- Having a good memory and thinking skills;
- Having a good social network and lots of warm relationships around you.

Interestingly however, the Index found that taking part in ‘creative activities’ such as the arts had the most direct influence in improving a person’s wellbeing in later life. The activities that older people took part in included dancing, playing a musical instrument, visiting museums, photography, singing, painting and writing.

This may be partly because older people who are fit and well, with an adequate income, a positive outlook on life, and possibly a good education too, are more likely to want to be able to get involved in activities like these, and more likely to be able to do so, than others who lack these advantages.

Differences between those with high and low wellbeing scores

When the attributes of the top 20% of the wellbeing distribution were compared with those in the bottom 20% some interesting differences emerged:

In a nutshell, those in the top 20%:

- scored considerably higher on thinking skills and had more qualifications;
- were for the most part not living alone;
- were outgoing and engaged, including in cultural activities;
- had a good friendship network;
- were physically active;
- did not have a long standing illness;
- were likely to own their home outright;
- did not have any serious money worries;
- and were generally satisfied with the state of local public services.

On the other hand, those in the bottom 20%:

- scored lower on thinking skills and had fewer qualifications;
- the majority lived alone;
- they were mostly not involved in cultural or social activities and they did not have a good social network. Indeed, tragically, one in eight of these unfortunate older people reported that they had no friends at all.
- They were also unlikely to be physically active;
- the great majority had a longstanding limiting illness and two in five had at least three diagnosed health conditions.
- Considerably fewer in this group owned their own home outright and one in four was on an income related benefit.
- Finally, they were likely to be dissatisfied with their local public services – on which, of course, they were likely to be highly reliant because of their needs.

But even though the Index paints the picture of an incredibly diverse older population, in which the opportunities to thrive and enjoy later life are not very equally shared, it found age itself isn't a barrier in determining wellbeing in later life: the average age for the group of people in the top 20% and the bottom 20% was very similar, at 70 and 71 years respectively.

As the number of people aged 60 and over is expected to pass the 20 million mark by 2030, the Index provides a unique snapshot on how older people are doing now and shines a light on some of the changes that are needed to improve the quality of life for our ageing population in future.

'Age need not be a barrier to wellbeing'

Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director at Age UK, said: "The good news from our Index is that age need not be a barrier to wellbeing and that there are things we can all do to make life better for individual older people, for our older population as a whole and indeed for ourselves as we age.

"Being positive and open, willing to try out new things, and engaged with what's going on around us turns out to be incredibly important in sustaining our wellbeing as we get older. Things like playing the piano, singing or dancing all seem to do a lot to help.

"To some extent we can all act on messages like these but we also need to be realistic and recognise that it is a lot easier to be positive, outgoing and involved if you are in good mental and physical health, financially secure, and well supported by family and friends than if none of these things are in place.

"Our Index reveals a huge gap between the most and the least favoured older people in our society and shows that we have to do more to help those with the lowest wellbeing. They are often alone, on a low income, in poor health, and with very few additional resources to fall back on.

"Good public services can make a huge difference to older people in this position so it is incredibly important that they are sustained. Against this context, the current cuts to social

care, the NHS and many local facilities like lunch clubs and day centres are a real worry because it is these least fortunate older people who are most likely to lose out as a result.”

“More generally, an overall wellbeing score of just over fifty per cent across our entire older population is a cause for concern – we think we should be doing a lot better. Health and finance were the two domains most responsible for holding back this overall score and are both areas where we need to go further and do more.

“For example, efforts to transform the NHS so it is more responsive to older people with multiple health conditions must be intensified, and policies like the Triple Lock must stay in place to protect those older people on the lowest incomes.”

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