

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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## “How To Live Past One Hundred”

The notion of living past 100 years of age may be a difficult stretch for some, but to others it seems highly desirable. Granted, an elderly person who is basically healthy may have a much stronger desire to live past 100 than a younger person who is suffering from the inevitability of aging. Anyway, a positive mindset plays an important role in exceptional longevity. Worldwide the global population is aging at a historic rate. The number of nonagenarians (people in their 90s) rose from 7.8 million to 16.5 million between 2000 and 2015. The number of centenarians (people age 100 and older) is expected to jump from 180,000 in 2000 to 3.2 million by 2050. According to a study published in *International Psychogeriatrics*, in nonagenarians and centenarians, exceptional longevity is characterized by positive psychological traits and mindset, hard work, and strong bonds with family, faith, and land. This study was conducted in Cilento, a city in southern Italy, which is the “Birthplace of the Mediterranean diet.” The investigators suggested that, based on previous research in this population, there could be partially linked heritability of longevity and positive traits. Studying the strategies of exceptionally long-lived and lived-well individuals, who not just survive but also thrive and flourish, enhances our understanding of health. Researchers found that nonagenarians and centenarians experienced worse physical health but maintained better mental well-being vs their younger relatives. This superior mental well-being was negatively associated with levels of depression and anxiety. This “paradox” of better well-being in the elderly despite worsened physical state agrees with previous research on the topic. Themes that emerged included positivity (resilience and optimism), working hard, and strong ties to both family and religion. Nonagenarian and centenarian subjects exhibited a strong need for control (i.e., domineering). These older individuals wanted to be in charge of their social lives and were described as “stubborn” by their younger relatives. Among all subjects, engagement in social activities was cited as a necessity to feel responsible, important, and connected. Resilience was also identified an integral part of nonagenarian and centenarian identity. Centenarians are role models for resilience because they have survived decades of risk and threats. They have had to adapt to countless daily stressors through a long life. Furthermore, exceptional longevity could represent sustainability, which involves a complex mix of identity, tradition, and change—thus indicating the importance of resilience, optimism, and purpose in life. The researchers concluded, “Exceptional longevity was characterized by a balance between acceptance of and grit to overcome adversities along with a positive attitude and close ties to family, religion, and land, providing purpose in life.”

In the America that I love, we long to live as long as we maintain our health.

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