

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Aging happy

The secret to finding joy and contentment as you age

By Bruce Horowitz  
Kaiser Health News

**B**y all rights, Fletcher Hall should not be happy.

At 76, the retired trade association manager has endured three heart attacks and eight heart bypass operations. He's had four stents and a balloon inserted in his heart. He has diabetes, glaucoma, osteoarthritis in both knees and diabetic neuropathy in both legs. He can't drive. He can't travel much. He can't see very well. And his heart condition severely limits his ability to exercise. On a good day, he can walk about 10 yards before needing to rest.

Yet the Brooklandville, Maryland, resident insists he's a genuinely happy guy — in part, because he appreciates what he can do.

"There's no question that as age impinges on your life, you do have 'black dog' days," said Hall. "I fight aging every day. But I never, ever give up. You have to work at keeping happy."

Hall focuses on the things that bring him joy: writing and listening to music and audiobooks. By juggling those pastimes throughout the day — every day — he ultimately feels a sense of contentment: "Every one of those things requires that I use my mind — which is a good thing."

Geriatric experts agree that Hall has pretty much figured out the right formula.

"You have to be willing to accept your new reality — and move forward," said Dr. Susan Lehmann, director of the geriatric psychiatry day program at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "Aim to have the best life you can at where you are right now."

Living with chronic disease often complicates life. The majority of adults 65 and older have multiple chronic conditions that contribute to frailty and disability, according to a 2013-14 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The percentage of chronic conditions among people 65 and over has increased over time, too. The percentage of people reporting hypertension, asthma, cancer and diabetes

### Tips for older adults to stay happy

- Accept your reality and move forward from there.
- Don't compare how you feel now to when you were younger.
- Focus on maximizing what you can do, not what you can't.
- Prioritize the things that are truly important to you.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Plan your day around maximizing your energy.
- Stay connected with friends and family.
- Be proactive and advocate for your own health care.
- Continue to exercise — even while seated.
- Be grateful for the small things.
- Have a purpose in your life.
- Find a way — even a small way — to help others.

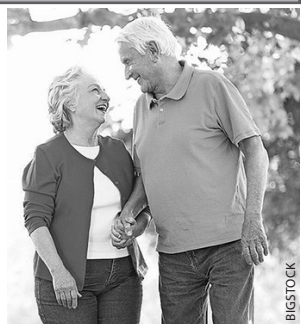
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was higher in 2013-14 than in 1997-98, reports the CDC.

Chronic conditions can have a devastating impact on men and women, according to the CDC report. About 57 percent of women and 55 percent of men 65 and older reported hypertension. Another 54 percent of women and 43 percent of men reported arthritis. And a full 35 percent of men and 25 percent of women reported dealing with heart disease. At the same time, older women were more likely to report clinically relevant depressive symptoms than were older men. In 2014, 15 percent of women 65 and older reported depressive symptoms, compared with 10 percent of men.

Chronic pain, in fact, more frequently leads to depression than does anxiety, said Dr. Kathleen Franco, associate dean at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine. That depression then leads to additional pain and suffering, she said: "So you have an emotional and physical component."

That's why Hall clings dearly to his greatest passion: writing. When he retired at 65, his original plan was to travel with his wife, Tracey. His physical limitations curbed those goals, so he circled back to what has brought him the most happiness. He stays engaged



in daily news by writing for two blogs — including one at-large column in which he espouses what he calls his "compassionate conservative" values.

Hall also adores reading, even though glaucoma has made it all but impossible. Not one to give up, he uses his Amazon Echo smart speaker to order audiobooks. He loves sitting on his balcony in the sunshine and listening to books. Similarly, he enjoys streaming both classical and country music, especially the Oak Ridge Boys and the country rock group Alabama.

Hall also has learned to use Alexa, the Echo's built-in digital assistant, to help with seemingly simple tasks that are difficult with poor eyesight. To tell time, he simply asks Alexa.

Beyond that, he avoids getting trapped in any frustration loops, such as trying to troubleshoot computer issues. During a recent technological tussle, he simply shut down the machine and turned on PBS and Charlie Rose. After taking time to de-stress, he was able to solve the tech issue.

Hall finds some excuse to get out of his house every day. Sometimes he runs an errand. Or he'll meet a friend for lunch. As a bird lover, he might just sit in a park listening to birds singing.

"If I can combine a pleasant venue with the sound of bird symphonies, I'm a happy camper," he said.

This is Hall's version of what some experts call "mindfulness." Mindfulness, which often involves deep, slow breathing that's aimed at lowering your heart rate and calming you down, can be highly effective on older, ailing people, said Franco: "It's simple. It doesn't cost anything. You can do it and no one even knows you're doing it."

One other thing often works like magic: helping others.

"Once you start giving to others, you tend not to get stuck in your own aches and pains," said Franco.



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