

Forever Young

The fountain of youth is a way of living, not a secret place of legend.

zaleas blossom in Mattie Francher's garden, filling her yard with pinks and purples, reds and yellows. It's been that way for more than 65 years. Mattie herself has bloomed even longer. At 102 years old, she still animatedly talks about tending to the large yard that surrounds her home in Austin, Texas.

a "I love to be outdoors," Mattie says. "Fortunately, I don't have any serious illness. It just takes me a little longer to get around. When I'm inside, my other passion is reading." When she's not keeping an eye out for weeds, she plows through stacks of magazines on topics ranging from medical discoveries to alternative energy to politics. Mattie also attends community service meetings and is involved with several University of Texas organizations.

Mattie is definitely a rarity, but that's because of her sparkling personality, not because she has lived long and lived well. Being vibrant into triple-digit age isn't out of most people's reach; it just may mean a little inner gardening, starting sooner rather than later.

"The expression, 'If you want to live longer, choose your parents wisely,' may not be terribly true," says Dr. Dilip Jeste, director of the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging in San Diego. "The role of genetics is limited and not as high as people once believed." The people and things that surround you have much more effect over your aging than what genes you were given. And how you think and act matters too.

BUILD A BUSY BRAIN

A typical day begins by 8 a.m. for Natasha Josefowitz, an 81-year-old retired business professor.

As president of the White Sands resident association in La Jolla, California, she attends a meeting about new construction at the facility before she's off to the local Rotary Club to give a lecture. Then she walks on a treadmill or works out with a personal trainer.

"I wish I were bored—that would mean I could sit a little bit and be quiet," Natasha jokes. "I have many balls in the air, but that makes me happy because it pushes me to stay active."

During the week she also attends art, music appreciation, and current event classes offered at the White Sands retirement facility. She's also fond of brainteaser games. "When you keep your brain active and engaged, you build new connections between the brain cells that act as a new coat of armor against age-related memory loss and the onset of Alzheimer's," says Dr. Thomas Perls, founder and director of the New England Centenarian Study and author of *Living to 100: Lessons in Living to Your Maximum Potential at Any Age*. "You can exercise your brain in much the same way you exercise muscles."

To keep your brain stimulated, Perls recommends novel and challenging activities, especially things such as learning a new language or a musical instrument. "It may be hard initially to start that new learning process," he says. "But it seems that once you start learning, it comes quickly later."

LET STRESS ROLL AWAY

While it's important to be busy, it's equally vital not to be. From more than a century of experience, Mattie Francher knows when to slow down. "People today don't eat together and are always rushing around to do nothing," she says.

"Centenarians manage their stress, rather than letting it manage them," Perls says. "They don't internalize stress, which can lead to heart disease and high blood pressure. Of the centenarians we have tested, they all scored low in neuroticism, meaning that they tend not to dwell on things."

Or as Mattie puts it: "I just say what I think. I don't hold anything in."

Some people are born with an easygoing disposition, but most of us have to cultivate it through activities such as yoga, meditation, prayer, and exercise.

BE A SOCIAL BUTTERFLY

Gladys Lipton, 89, prides herself on her ability to listen. When she and her husband owned a supermarket in Pleasantville, New York, she connected with customers by listening to the stories of their lives.

Now living in the Seacrest Village Retirement Community in Encinitas, California, Gladys, often chats with friends and shares stories. She also frequently talks with family on the phone and writes them letters. She credits her extensive network of social connections for a speedy and complete recovery from serious heart problems a few years ago.

"Strong social support lowers the risk of hypertension and heart disease, along with the chance of depression, and can even lower mortality rates," Jeste says. "You can talk not only with those who are close physically, but also with someone you know on the phone every day. These friends can offer support when you need it."

AS YOU THINK, SO YOU ARE

As Natasha Josefowitz tends to her whirlwind of daily activities, she often reminds herself of a mantra that has kept her feeling young: Be with positive people and always remember to have fun.

Such a sunny disposition may mean more to your health than you realize. Dutch researchers found that optimists had a 55 percent lower rate of death overall and a 23 percent lower chance of heart failure.

However, Jeste warns against unrealistic, pie-in-the sky optimism. “The right kind of optimism is based in reality, which will help you change your life for the better by believing you can do things such as quitting smoking or starting to exercise,” he says. “Especially as you age, being realistic and optimistic means you find ways to live with changes in your life.” And that means for as long and as well as you can.

My Way

How a vivacious 70-year-old New York businesswoman finds herself getting younger year after year.

I remember the very first morning I looked in my bathroom mirror and saw wrinkles. Not crow’s feet or the marionette lines plastic surgeons talk about. Wrinkles. Honest-to-goodness signs of old age.

And then in my typical way, I forgot about them until months later when I noticed that even more had somehow formed. I wish I could say I just shrugged them off but, like most women, I went after those wrinkles with a vengeance. Why, just this morning, I found myself searching for my \$120-an-ounce tube of the latest miracle cream. The problem was that it was too small to find without my glasses. “Nuts,” I said to myself,

“I can’t find my glasses without my glasses.” Then I laughed hard enough to give myself a few more smile lines.

So what does being “forever young” mean to me? Simply, it’s living in and treasuring the moment. Funny moments, like this morning. Or unexpected moments, such as when I see something beautiful on vacation—a small painting or a soft and luxurious wrap—that I can take home and delight in.

And then there is love. I was introduced to a man last New Year’s Eve. Soon afterwards we had our first date, and not long after that our first kiss. His comment was “yummy!” Being desirable enough to be called “yummy” is pretty darned invigorating, I promise you.—KATIE DEGENHARDT