Motivation and Successful Aging

By Whitney McFadden, MSTREAM Program Alumna

“The two most important things to keep you living well into old age are to be motivated and to breathe.” These sage words came from a speaker at the successful aging seminar run by the Stein Institute’s Medical Students’ Training and Research Experience in Aging and Mental Health (MSTREAM) Program. The seminar featured community members who, having excelled in old age, offered their secrets to aging well.

I was surprised and very pleased that this speaker emphasized motivation. I found the study of aging well to be complex, involving longevity, well-being, mastery, growth, positive adaptation, resilience, the ability of an individual to be successful after hardship, good mental and physical health, and strong social support. Motivation in successful aging was a topic I was eager to study.

Motivation has a powerful effect on how we live our daily lives. The motivational circuitry of the brain (the nucleus accumbens) is involved in most of our behavior and decision-making. After studying this part of the brain in mice and rats, I became curious about how these neural circuits and brain regions functioned in individuals who have aged well. In order to understand how motivation plays a part in mental health and aging, I set out to determine how it makes some of us more likely to live a long, happy, fulfilled life, and others not. Are these regions resilient or do they change over time?

As a part of the MSTREAM research project, I investigated elements of motivation in the UC San Diego Successful AGing Evaluation (SAGE) study conducted on 523 individuals in the San Diego area who were more than fifty years old. Elements were selected based on previously validated motivation scales and included freedom from negative affect, disempowerment/empowerment, and drive. My colleagues and I found that motivation scores were associated with high self-reported successful aging scores, and high motivation scores predicted higher successful aging scores. Importantly, we found that motivation and successful aging were correlated despite changes in physical and social functioning.

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psychiatry service is designed to provide the highest quality individualized clinical care for older adults needing concurrent behavioral health and medical treatment.

Dr. Sewell attended Grinnell College, where he obtained his bachelor’s degree in biology cum laude in 1981. He earned his medical degree in 1985 from the University of Iowa. Dr. Sewell completed his first two years of psychiatry residency training at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and finished his psychiatry residency training at UC San Diego, where he was given the UC San Diego Chairman’s Award for Research Excellence during the Psychiatry Residency in 1989. Following residency, Dr. Sewell became a fellow in geriatric psychiatry at the VA San Diego Medical Center, and upon completion of his fellowship joined the UC San Diego Department of Psychiatry faculty. He is board-certified in psychiatry with added qualifications in geriatric psychiatry.

Dr. Sewell is a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. His other memberships include the Stein Institute for Research on Aging, the UC San Diego Academic Geriatric Resource Center, the Gerontological Society of America, and the American Geriatrics Society.

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• Turn left at the first hallway. Garren Auditorium is in Room 1105.
From our studies, it appears motivation is an inherent aspect of successful aging that exists regardless of how well an individual functions physically or socially. From previous reports, there are likely to be aspects of resilience involved; however, this relationship has yet to be fully studied. From what we know, a good predisposition and something to live for keeps successful agers appreciating the joys of life for decades more than the rest of the population. If we could bottle motivation, and keep breathing, we would have a recipe of successful aging for everyone.

Whitney McFadden is an alumna of MSTREAM, a unique, national research-training program in aging, neuroscience, and mental health funded by the National Institute of Mental Health and administered by the Stein Institute for Research on Aging. The goal of the program is to encourage budding physician-scientists to pursue a career related to geriatric psychiatry. After graduating from the UC San Diego School of Medicine, McFadden will be attending the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, New York, for her residency and a doctoral program in psychiatry. She is looking forward to continuing research in psychiatry and aging, studying the effects of motivation on our brain function and behavior.

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