

# Finding joy at age 100: Talking to centenarians about living their best life at any age

June 26 2023, by Heather Joyce Nelson, Beverlee Ziefflie and Paula Mayer

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Centenarian Clementina Ripplinger with researcher Heather Nelson. Researchers spoke to very elderly people about what brings them joy and how they plan for the future. Credit: Shane Luhnig, Author provided

Aging is seen as a period of loss, and there are unhelpful [myths about older adults](#). Myths lead to treatable conditions being considered normal parts of aging, including cognitive decline, dementia, depression and

loneliness. Some even consider exercise dangerous in older adults.

At the same time, [mainstream media](#) promotes the message that [being young is central to a person's value](#). These ideas lead to ageism and [older adults](#) being seen as lesser.

After spending time with six female [centenarians](#) in assisted living facilities, our research team—which included four nursing researchers and a documentary filmmaker—learned there is plenty still worth living for.

Centenarians are a small but growing segment of the population with [13,844 centenarians in Canada](#), and our findings debunk myths about the experience of aging.

We asked the centenarians questions about what brings them joy and how they plan for the future because we wanted to learn how the very elderly plan for and find ways to live their best lives. The results of this study were [turned into a 32-minute documentary](#) that captures participants' long and interesting lives and offers insight into continued meaning experienced by centenarians in their daily lives. Three of the centenarians died shortly after the interviews took place.

## **Long and interesting lives**

The participants were born between the years 1919 and 1922. They were children during the Great Depression and [young adults](#) during the Second World War.

One of the women helped build bullet casings and worked on the [Lancaster bomber](#). Another woman helped her husband protect the blueprints of the ill-fated [Avro Arrow aircraft](#) when he brought them home from work. Two women lost their husbands when their children

were small and had to go to work to support their families. They all experienced love and adventure.

Our team was fascinated by their stories and wanted to further explore what their lives look like today.

Betty, 101, saw happiness as a choice. "I don't know what's really to complain about. I went through life staying happy," she said.

### **Joy and challenges**

This study used a research method called [thematic analysis](#) to find four themes: Finding Joy, Act your Age, Looking Forward and Putting Challenges into Perspective.

The centenarians found joy each day and enjoyed the little things such as activities, visits and treats. Betty enjoyed cheating at solitaire and Jean, 100, played the piano. Clementina, 101, had fun gambling and Joyce, 100, continued to write stories and watch her grandchildren in music concerts.

Family was central to their lives and they enjoyed spending time with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Two of the women stated that raising their children was the biggest accomplishment in their lives.

The centenarians also found great joy in reminiscing about their interesting lives. However, one of the challenges was that there was no one left alive who had the same shared experiences.

### **Limitations**

The centenarians were constrained by the limitations of society, their

bodies and their self-perceptions. "You have to act your age," said Clementina. She physically described this phenomenon by clasping her hands together in her lap and sitting still.

Some participants found life to be boring at 100 compared to their lives as younger adults. They had limited opportunities to do what they would like. "We had homes," said Joyce, 100, describing how they had known better lives, which made it hard to accept the constraints of their current existence.

In spite of these feelings, many of the participants continued to be busy and live life fully despite limitations. Jean, despite needing a wheelchair for mobility, continues to do people's taxes for a volunteer organization, plays piano for church services and leads choirs within her facility.

"I am constantly rebelling against my situation physically," she said.

The other women in this study also continued to challenge norms of what their age and disabilities meant. Joyce writes and submits short stories for publication, and has a poem in the war archives in Ottawa.

Assisted living facilities often prioritize resident safety, but this can come at a cost to personal freedom. Some residents only leave their facility accompanied by a facility employee or a family member. Clementina rebelled against this restriction and at the age of 97, snuck out of her assisted living facility in a cab to go to the casino, pretending that she was going to meet her son.

All of the participants put their life challenges into perspective. They all had lost spouses, friends and some had lost their children. "I was broken," Clementina said about losing her husband.

Christine, 102, was asked how she managed after losing her husband

when her children were still small. "I am still here," she said.

## The future

Most of the centenarians had few plans for themselves for the future and were more interested in leading their day-to-day lives. Betty jokingly described the inevitability of her death and that she was "looking for the bucket." Most described being prepared to die except for Jean, who laughed and said she didn't have time to die. "I have too many plans."

The centenarians looked to the future of their families and the larger community and entrusted the next generation to make good choices.

Participants in this study had long and interesting lives and continued to find meaning each day. This study supports the idea that older adults continue to lead engaging lives and that we need to support older adults to live their best lives at any age.

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