

# What is successful aging? Gerontologists strive to build consensus

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Scholars have long debated what successful aging is, how to measure it, and how to promote it. But the [latest issue](#) of *The Gerontologist* lays the groundwork for building consensus on the topic—while pointing out that the answer may differ among academics and the general public, as well as across populations and demographic groups.

"With an enhanced understanding of what successful aging is, we will be in a stronger position to develop interventions that will enable more people to age successfully," stated *The Gerontologist* Editor Rachel Pruchno, PhD, in the issue's opening editorial. "The sheer number of people comprising the [baby boom generation](#) transformed academic interest in successful aging to a public policy imperative. Now more than ever, it is critical to develop science that empowers people to experience the best old age possible."

The topic of successful aging reached new heights of popularity following a 1987 study by John W. Rowe, MD, and Robert L. Kahn, PhD, titled "Human Aging: Usual and Successful," which appeared in *Science*. They followed up with a subsequent article in *The Gerontologist* (and later book) titled "Successful Aging."

Their work helped the field of gerontology evolve from one arguably fixated on loss to one characterized by heterogeneity and the potential for growth. In the latter piece, they wrote that "successful aging is multidimensional, encompassing the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities."

Now, through a series of 16 articles in *The Gerontologist*, top researchers in the field have looked back at the progress made over the past 28 years—and whether or not Rowe and Kahn's analysis is still relevant. Some of the journal's authors even suggest that the concept of

successful aging should be abandoned, pointing to social inequalities and the problems associated with labeling a person as an "unsuccessful ager."

The issue includes a number of groundbreaking studies involving several segments of the U.S. population. For example, one of the articles reports on the first study to examine physical and mental health quality of life among the older LGBT population. Another entry uses queer theory to explore the experiences of transgender persons who contemplate or pursue a gender transition later in life. A further article addresses the growing body of literature suggesting that black women experience a number of social challenges that may present as barrier to aging successfully. Together, they demonstrate the necessity for gerontological theory to address how social, cultural, behavioral, and environmental constructs affect physical health and psychological well-being while guiding policy, [health care services](#), and research among diverse race and gendered populations.

*The Gerontologist* also contains articles examining successful aging across cultures. It reports that young, middle-aged, and older lay persons from the U.S. and Germany have quite similar concepts of successful aging, which they view in far more multidimensional terms than do established scientific theories. This demonstrates that laypersons' views of successful aging pose scientific challenges because they include a much wider variety of factors than are considered in most theoretical models. A separate study examines [labor force participation](#) rates and life expectancy among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Countries—and finds that member nations with older adults who remain active in a paid work capacity tend to have elders who live longer.

"Nearly three decades after Rowe and Kahn's initial article was published, it is incumbent on gerontologists to use the conceptual and empirical

knowledge base that now exists to develop consensus about what successful aging is and how it should be measured," Pruchno wrote. "We should approach this goal knowing that our measures will not be perfect, but at least our findings will be comparable. Advancing this work will help us learn how individuals can experience successful aging regardless of their social or health conditions."

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

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