

Healthy LIVING while aging!



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Lifelong learning encourages health, connection and purpose

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Keeping our minds and bodies engaged is one of the most effective strategies for promoting well-being as we age. A holistic view of aging considers cognitive, physical, emotional and existential dimensions — each playing a role in how we age and thrive.

A study published in *The Journals of Gerontology* found that adults over the age of 50 who engaged in learning three new skills — such as a language, photography or drawing — demonstrated marked improvements in cognitive function. This aligns with longstanding gerontological principles emphasizing that mental stimulation across the lifespan enhances brain health and adaptability.

The concept of “use it or lose it” is more than a common adage. The National Library of Medicine highlights that adult neurogenesis — the formation of new neurons — does occur in later life, but these new cells require stimulation to be functionally integrated into existing neural pathways. While some level of neuronal attrition is typical in the aging process, significant or accelerated loss can signal underlying neurodegenerative conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of dementia.

While research into cognitive decline is extensive and multifaceted, one thing is clear: Engaging in lifelong learning offers measurable cognitive benefits. It may not prevent dementia entirely, but it can play a role in delaying its onset and supporting overall brain health. Mental engagement through structured or informal learning strengthens neural resilience and boosts memory — making it an accessible and meaningful tool for aging well.

Dolores Ward Cox is the Executive Director of Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at the Sanford Center for Aging.



Equally important is the emotional and social dimension of aging. According to *Nevada Tomorrow*, 76.5% of Washoe County residents age 65 and older report experiencing social isolation. Isolation is a risk factor for numerous adverse health outcomes, and programs like the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) address this by creating space for connection, purpose and belonging.

While formal learning environments aren't necessary to keep the mind engaged, they do provide valuable structure, a sense of community and consistent opportunities for growth. The OLLI at the University of Nevada, Reno is one of 124 institutes nationwide dedicated to lifelong learning for individuals age 50 and older. Through intellectually stimulating lectures, engaging interest groups in areas like the arts, languages and literature, active outdoor activities such as hiking and kayaking, OLLI supports physical, cognitive and social vitality.

But lifelong learning is about more than staying mentally active or socially connected — it’s about reclaiming purpose. A study in the National Library of Medicine shows that having a sense of purpose is associated with positive health outcomes and overall life satisfaction. For many older adults, retirement or evolving family roles can create a shift in identity. Lifelong learning helps fill that space, offering meaning, direction and a sense of contribution in this stage of life.

Aging well demands a broader, more inclusive understanding — one that honors the whole person. It means nurturing not just the mind and body, but also joy, relationships and a deeper sense of meaning.

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