



## **Nurturing Lifelong Health and Well-being Presentation Summary**

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### **What is the SFU Lifelong Health and Wellbeing Lab?**

The SFU Lifelong Health and Wellbeing Lab, led by Dr. Theresa Pauly, focuses on advancing research on aging, social relationships, and health. Through innovative methods like real-time data collection using heart rate monitors, stress hormone analysis, and participant activity tracking, the lab explores how daily stressors and social connections impact older adults' health. Additionally, longitudinal studies identify key social resources that support healthy aging and highlight risks for marginalized groups. The lab aims to inform programs and policies that promote independence, improve stress management, and enhance the overall quality of life for older adults.

### **Well-Being in Healthy Aging**

Well-being in healthy aging is a multidimensional concept that includes physical health, emotional resilience, social engagement, and psychological well-being, all of which contribute to overall quality of life. It also involves maintaining a sense of purpose and independence as individuals adapt to the changes that come with aging, such as redefining roles after retirement and coping with physical and social shifts. Key to this experience are dignity and autonomy, which empower individuals to make decisions and stay true to their personal values.

Affective well-being, as defined by Charles (2010), focuses on the emotional aspects of well-being, including the frequency and intensity of positive and negative emotions. It emphasizes the importance of managing emotions effectively to maintain overall health, highlighting that a balance between positive and negative affect is essential. Research has shown that older adults, despite facing challenges like health changes and social losses, tend to maintain high levels of emotional well-being through resilience and coping strategies (Charles, 2010). This is partly due to their focus on meaningful aspects of life and a tendency to prioritize positive experiences, as older adults often remember positive information better than negative (Carstensen et al., 2003). They also use strategies to enhance positive emotions, such as seeking uplifting situations and modifying environments to promote well-being (Livingstone & Isaacowitz, 2021).

### **Emotional Well-Being**

Emotional well-being refers to the ability to experience, express, and regulate emotions in a way that supports mental health, resilience, and life satisfaction. It involves managing both positive and negative emotions effectively, building meaningful relationships, and adapting to challenges with emotional balance. Emotional well-being is closely linked to emotional competence, which includes skills like identifying, expressing, and understanding emotions, and emotional regulation, which involves controlling emotional responses adaptively.

Research by Fantini-Hauwel et al. (2014) reveals that while older adults (ages 71–80) may become less skilled at recognizing and expressing emotions, they often improve in managing emotional responses. This may be due to life experience and a focus on what truly matters emotionally. Older adults tend to prioritize emotional balance and positivity, which contributes to greater stability. Those with stronger emotional regulation tend to experience more positive emotions, which can



lower stress, enhance immune function, and increase resilience. These individuals also typically use fewer medications, as emotional health supports overall physical well-being.

### **Immediate and Long-Term Benefits of Physical Activity**

Regular physical activity provides immediate and long-term benefits essential for healthy aging, including reducing the risk of dementia, depression, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and various cancers (Nieman & Wentz, 2019; Jones & Davison, 2019). It supports brain and heart health, strengthens bones, improves balance, and preserves mobility and independence. Beyond physical health, engaging in group exercise fosters social connections, combatting loneliness and isolation. However, physical activity often declines with age, underscoring the importance of tailored, age-appropriate programs to encourage exercise (Langhammer, Bergland & Rydwick, 2018). Promoting physical activity is vital for lifelong health and well-being.

The Walk n' Talk (WTL) program is a community initiative aimed at improving social connections and physical wellness in older adults by pairing them with volunteers for shared walks. Research by Hwang et al. (2019) found that WTL participants (ages 65+) experienced improvements in social engagement and mental well-being. Additionally, lifelong learning programs have been shown to promote physical, cognitive, and social activity in older adults. A study by Wenzel et al. (2024) found that participants in such programs (ages 65+) experienced increased leisure activity engagement, new skill acquisition, and better physical health compared to non-participants.

### **Physical Activity Recommendations**

The CDC recommends older adults engage in aerobic physical activity that includes: 150 mins of moderate intensity (30 mins/day over 5 days/week), e.g. yoga OR 75 mins of vigorous-intensity, e.g. jogging, AND 2 days of activities that strengthen muscles and improve balance.

### **Solitude**

Solitude and loneliness are distinct concepts: loneliness arises from a desire for more social interaction (Perlman & Peplau, 1981), while solitude is simply time spent alone, which can be positive or negative depending on the context (Choi et al., 2022; Hoppmann & Pauly, 2022). Solitude can foster reflection, creativity, and self-care (Coplan et al., 2019), but when undesired, it may lead to rumination or feelings of isolation (Lay et al., 2019; Pauly et al., 2021). For older adults, solitude often serves as a positive experience due to their selective social engagement and enhanced emotional regulation (Hoppmann & Pauly, 2022; Nikitin et al., 2022). Dr. Pauly's research highlights the importance of distinguishing between desired and bothersome solitude to better understand its impact on well-being, particularly for older adults who spend significant time alone (Chui et al., 2014; Pauly et al., 2017). This work underscores solitude's dynamic role in fostering self-reflection and emotional growth while informing mental health and social practices.

### **Social Connection**

Social connections are foundational to healthy aging, positively impacting emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being. Strong relationships foster resilience during life transitions, reduce feelings of isolation, and enhance life satisfaction. Social engagement has been linked to better cognitive functioning and a lower risk of dementia (Kuiper et al., 2016). Moreover,



connections improve physical health by reducing stress, boosting immune function, and lowering the risk of chronic diseases, while isolation is associated with increased health risks (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Community programs and initiatives play a crucial role in fostering social interactions, providing older adults with opportunities for meaningful engagement. Tailored interventions and age-friendly environments can further reduce barriers to connection, ensuring older adults stay engaged and supported throughout their later years.

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