



The Wisdom of Our Elders: 7 Ways to Optimize Happiness and Serenity

By Charles Dodgen, PhD

Do you ever find yourself wishing that, at a time when our country and the entire world seem so chaotic and unsafe, you could do more to better your own life—feel happier and more secure? And wouldn't it also be nice if the desired remedies were natural and accessible, so that they could be adapted to your benefit without having to address the larger world of problems? I have good news: we can employ ordinary measures for mood improvement and to fight against anxiety, depression, and stress. Surprisingly, feeling better does not usually require a miracle, just careful management of the mundane elements of our lives. At least that is my conclusion from working with nursing home residents.

I arrived at my optimistic determination in a surprising manner—not by the more typical method of interviewing elders to gather nuggets of wisdom but by spending time with them. As social scientists, psychologists use various procedures for acquiring knowledge. For example, if I wanted to understand the ingredients of success in high school, I might interview graduates. However, I might also take a job in a school, interact with current students, and make my own observations and conclusions. This latter approach is closer to the one I employed in the nursing home. In studying individuals in this setting, I found that they were not just representatives of the aged or disabled but of all of us. In addition, I established that the ways in which they dealt with their often-extreme challenges served as models for coping with adversity in our lives. In the nursing home, I gained specific appreciation of the healing power of words, compassion, and tender loving care, and the importance of social connection. My experience also revealed the central role of feelings as keys to understanding, motivation, and communication, and the necessity to accept personal responsibility to find purpose and meaning, and to adopt a healthy attitude. I have also been alerted to the value of spirituality for contentment and prosperity. Even better, my experience has confirmed that the solutions used to great benefit in the nursing home can be applied by anyone in everyday life to attain improved satisfaction and well-being.

In my book, *Simple Lessons For A Better Life: Unexpected Inspiration From Inside The Nursing Home*, I discuss a collection of life lessons that derived from my nursing home work. And today, I want to concentrate on our relationship with our personal environment and those factors we can control for our betterment. Unfortunately, most of the news stories we encounter are negative that can lead to the false impression that we must fix the world before we can be happy—an illusion that can lead to a sense of futility, demoralization, and apathy. What can any of us do to resolve wars, the national and international economies, environmental changes, or disease epidemics? Not much. My work, fortunately, has led me to the firm opinion

that small changes in our personal environment can yield big emotional and psychological benefits.

A brief discussion of a nursing home resident, Carmen, serves to illustrate my point. When I met her, Carmen was an unhappy, seventy-two-year-old widow with three children, who was contending with spinal stenosis that had rendered her legs weak and painful and had left her virtually immobile. Prior to our meeting, she had kept an untidy room littered with clothes, books and magazines, and she did nothing to personalize or beautify her living space. She rarely came out of her room and interacted very infrequently with other residents, including her roommate. She had been unkempt, claiming that washing was too uncomfortable. She had also spent most of her time and attention on the daily news as obtained from her TV and radio, leading to anger and frustration with the world. Separated from home and family, disabled, and often in pain, she *had* to be depressed, right? Wrong. Carmen was helped to de-clutter and reorganize her room. She was convinced to go through the discomfort of bathing more regularly, improving her hygiene and appearance. She agreed to come out of her room and to attend activities, in order to interact more with other people and exercise her body. She also changed her eating and entertainment habits, consuming healthier foods and varying her TV and radio listening. Although significant aspects of Carmen's life remained unchanged, her spirits lifted and her quality of life improved dramatically. Changes she made to her physical surroundings, her social activity, and her "internal environment" were beneficial even though other important considerations, like her health, were static.

The moral of Carmen's story is that we have greater control of our happiness and mental health than we may think. No matter what your circumstances, you can make modest changes that make your life better. I like the analogy of the greenhouse that is used to form an ideal environment for the growth of plants. Instead of adjusting sunlight, temperature, humidity, and other factors for plant health, you can *create* factors related to optimal human growth. While life outside of your "greenhouse" may be harsh, you will be well-fortified to deal with it by intentionally mastering your micro-environment, namely the people, and places you most interact with. Don't waste your time searching for a cure-all—you might be pleasantly surprised at the power of a few simple changes to improve your outlook.

Seven keys to optimizing your life are:

1. **Awareness and empowerment.** Recognize that you *can* change the world—the world that matters most for your resilience and verve. Allow the appropriate authorities to deal with the important matters beyond your direct control.
2. **Visual appeal.** Make yourself and your surroundings pleasant. You will look and feel better and you will be more attractive to others.
3. **Association with positive people.** Make it a priority to spend as much time with people who are supportive, comforting, fun, and who make you feel good.
4. **Mindful consumption.** You consume food and drink, as well as mental stimulation. If you pollute your body with poor food choices, excesses of low quality foods, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, you will suffer the consequences. Similarly, you must choose healthy "mind food": a diverse diet consisting of reading, writing, talking, meditating, listening to music, and watching television and movies.

5. **Engagement in regular exercise.** The environment is not just good to look at. You benefit by moving around in it. A significant part of joy in life comes from physical activity. Go for walks, ride a bike, or engage in any other activity that you enjoy and can safely participate in.
6. **Setting of modest, achievable goals.** Do not overwhelm yourself by being too ambitious. Take the low-hanging fruit and build on success. If you feel you want to improve your fitness level, increase your physical exercise a little at a time. Don't set out to complete a marathon in a week, that is setting yourself up for failure.
7. **Maintenance of a positive focus.** Whatever you direct your mind to will be what your body reacts to. Discipline yourself to spend more time thinking about positives such as a gratitude list, happy memories, and successes.

Charles E. Dodgen, PhD, a licensed psychologist for nearly 30 years, has maintained a vibrant private practice in Caldwell, New Jersey. A former director of psychology in a private psychiatric hospital, Dr. Dodgen provides a truly comprehensive spectrum of services for which the term, general practice, does not do full justice. He has, essentially, three separate areas of treatment focus: child and adolescent problems; substance abuse (across all ages); and geriatric services. Dr. Dodgen has published in each practice area and his credits include five books: *Simple Lessons for a Better Life: Unexpected Inspiration from Inside the Nursing Home* (Prometheus Books, 2015), *Nicotine Dependence: Understanding and Applying the Most Effective Treatment Interventions* (American Psychological Association Press, 2005), *Substance Use Disorders: Assessment and Treatment* (Academic Press, co-authored with Shea, 2000), *What Should I Know About Someone Who Abuses Alcohol and Other Drugs?* (Learning Publications, 1998, 1994), and *Psychoactive Substance Use Disorders: A Comprehensive Resource for Clinicians and Researchers* (self-published, C & D Publications, co-authored with Shea, 1997). Dr. Dodgen has also published book chapters, *Drug Abuse* (Elsevier, 2004), and *Sequential, Timing, Rhythmic and Eye Movement Problems in Dyslexics* (John Wiley & Sons, co-authored with Pavlidis, 1990); and, he has written articles as an invited expert author for *Psychology Today* (www.psychologytoday.com) and Alzheimers.net (www.alzheimers.net).