Aging...Well
(at any age)

“You can’t turn back the clock. But you can wind it up again.”
Bonnie Prudden
physical therapist and author

No matter how you look at it, aging is inevitable. Yet many of the “unpleasant” signs we all too often associate with aging—everything from gaining weight to losing mental alertness—do not have to be inevitable. The choices we make every day, whether we’re age 18 or 80, affect our quality of life and, thus, whether we simply age or age well.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development has researched hundreds of individuals since the 1930s and has found that lifestyle choices play a significant role in how we age. In fact, according to George Vaillant, M.D., director of the study, it’s “astonishing how many of the ingredients that predict longevity are within your control.”

Research from the Harvard study and various other sources indicates that maintaining strong social connections, staying physically and intellectually active, and even having a positive attitude all contribute to aging well.

You’ve got to have friends. People who remain socially active and maintain friendships are less likely to show mental, emotional, and physical decline with age, indicating that this type of interaction is not only enjoyable, it’s also beneficial to health and longevity.

Do you consider yourself socially active now? How about 10 years ago? Do you see yourself engaging in the same social activities 10 or 20 years from now?

Where I was:

____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

Where I am:

____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

Where I want to be:

____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

Take time to focus on the following areas of your life:
• Social connections
• Physical activity
• Intellectual activity
• Attitude

To help you better evaluate these areas, think about where you were, where you are now, and where you want to be for each area. Take “physical activity,” for example. Maybe you were very active in team sports in your youth, but have found yourself putting exercise on the back burner as the years passed. How/why did this happen? Was it a demanding job? Kids? Life in general? What will you do to get back on track? You may not be able to clear hurdles like you did on your high school track team, but you could start walking or riding a bike. Either one is a small, doable step in the right direction.

As you reflect on each area, write your response after where I was, where I am, and where I want to be in the space provided. Discuss your responses with your TOPS chapter. Break off into smaller groups of three or four and discuss one area at a time.
Staying physically active is essential to maintaining strength, energy, independence, and overall health and well-being. Following an exercise program consistently is about as close to the Fountain of Youth as one can hope to get. In fact, a study in the Public Library of Science (PLoS One) involving a group of volunteers age 65 and older found that exercise—strength training, in particular—partially reversed signs of aging inside the muscle cells.

Think about your own level of physical activity: past, present and future. For example, if you are not as active as you once were, what could you do to change that? Perhaps you used to enjoy jogging, but now it just plain hurts. You could try a form of exercise that is easier on your joints such as swimming or biking.

Where I was:

Where I am:

Where I want to be:

It pays to keep your mind stimulated, at any age. Unfortunately, some people think mental decline is an inevitable part of the aging process. In a way, your mind is like your body: the less you demand of it, the less you will get back. There are plenty of ways to keep your mind firing. Try a crossword or Sudoku puzzle, read a book, write in a journal, or challenge your grandchild—or grandparent—to a board game.

Do you keep your brain trained with books, puzzles or games? Perhaps there is a skill you wish to improve or a foreign language you’d like to learn or brush up on.

Where I was:

Where I am:

Where I want to be:

You’ve probably heard it before: attitude is everything. What you may not know, however, is just how important maintaining a positive attitude is. Research published in the January 20, 2009, issue of Neurology suggests that maintaining a positive outlook may actually cut one’s chances of developing dementia.

How would you describe your overall attitude? Sure, we all have “off” days, when even cracking a smile seems like work. We are only human, after all. Yet, think about how your general attitude has changed or remained the same over the years. Do you tend to look at situations with optimism or pessimism? Write about it below.

Chapter Program
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Where I was:
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

Where I am:
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

Where I want to be:
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________

Pay special attention to what you have written next to where I am and where I want to be under each area. If you are not where you want to be now, what is stopping you from getting there? If you would like to stay active 10 years from now, what will you do to make sure that happens? No matter what your age, there is no time like the present to get started on the road to better health, better aging and better living. We may not be able to turn back the clock or change the genetic hand we were dealt, but we can make the most out of the time we have now and play our best with the hand we’ve got.

Aging well takes conscious effort. It can add life to your years and maybe even years to your life. Now that’s something to look forward to.