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The Later Years – Maintaining Your Independence  
Michigan State University Extension Service  
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# THE LATER YEARS of LIFE

## 1.

# Maintaining Your Independence

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One of the continuing needs we have in life is maintaining our independence. We live in a society, however, that is often over-solicitous of both the very young and the very old. There is a sort of overprotectiveness that says, "Here, let me do that for you. You really aren't able...really aren't capable..." Let's consider, then, the importance of hanging on to our independence, how to manage that in our later years, and what it can mean for our self-esteem.

### **What Is Independence?**

#### **Why Is It Important?**

Independence is a quality that sets us apart as individuals. It is never an "either/or" proposition, but is always balanced, to a certain extent, by our necessary dependence on others. On the other hand, being independent calls for relative freedom from reliance on, or control by, others.

Independence fosters a sense of competency that makes us feel good about ourselves because we feel in control of our lives. We are gratified when we are able to make decisions about the direction of our own lives. Feeling we are in the "driver's seat" gives us a certain sense of security, and motivates us to be responsible for our own future. When we are denied our independence by others or fail to exercise it ourselves, we often lose, in equal measure, our sense of self and concern about tomorrow.

### **How Can We Maintain Independence In the Later Years?**

Success in maintaining our independence is related to our financial security, our alternatives in housing and transportation, health care and available community services. It is also largely related to our attitude in exercising control in those important areas of our lives.

Most people choose to stay in their own homes as long as possible, rather than moving in with relatives or into institutional settings for the elderly. Research findings support this trend, indicating that elderly persons remain physically and mentally healthier when living in their own familiar surroundings. Lorene Keeler of Oklahoma State University writes, "Everybody has to be somewhere. The important thing is to have a choice of where

and how to live, and a chance to have needs met in a society where there is acceptance and respect for people of all ages."

We should find out about available services in our communities, especially those for handicapped senior citizens.

Physical and emotional impairments that may accompany the later years, such as those due to loss of sight and hearing, amputation, poor nutrition and health, may especially encourage dependency. Often, the effects of these impairments may be lessened by taking advantage of available rehabilitation, physical aids (special magnifying lenses, hearing aids, etc.), library services such as "talking books," point-to-point transportation and such nutrition programs as "Meals on Wheels."

Financial help is available through income tax assistance, Social Security and Medicare information and, depending on the community, reduced prices in such areas as transportation, restaurant meals, utilities and recreational programs. Many communities provide support through their churches, community centers and special programs for retired persons.

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Finally, we should maintain a realistic picture of our own skills and abilities. We should not allow stereotyped attitudes (that tend to lump all senior citizens together) to color our picture of ourselves or any disabilities we may have. Continuing to do the things we do well brings reward not only to us, but to those around us. Disabilities that develop may require some creative alterations in our lifestyle, but they need not become handicaps unless we see them as closing doors to us.

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In cooperation with  
the Human Development  
Impact Committee

## Some Suggestions By Older People For Living Alone Satisfactorily\*

Cultivate some friends who will call on you and whom you can visit. More than just having friends, you need people with whom you like to go places and do things.

Develop some close friends with whom you can talk over anything and who will care what happens to you, especially when you get sick.

Choose activities that take you out of the house, such as going to church or attending regular meetings of an organization or club. Try to find at least one activity which represents doing something for someone less fortunate than yourself.

Whenever you can, keep in touch with old acquaintances even though this can only be done by writing letters.

Take an interest in what is going on in the world, your country, and your community. Make use of your voting privilege.

Make sure you eat well-balanced meals and eat some of them with a friend or relative.

Surround yourself with the things you enjoy. If you like plants or animals, have them in your home to add interest and variety to your living. Dogs are relatively easy to care for and provide a great deal of company as well as security. Birds also make good company when you encourage them to come and eat at your windowsill.

Arrange for a telephone to be close at hand. A telephone is essential when you want to get in touch with someone in time of need. It's a link to the outside world when you cannot get out of the house, but feel like talking with one of your friends.

Be a good neighbor to those who live nearby.

\*The primary source of these suggestions is Peter Beatty and Stanley Hayes' PREP Participant Manual, pp. 2-11.

## References and Recommended Reading

Peter Beatty and Stanley Hayes. **PREP Participant Manual**. Binghamton, New York: Action for Older Persons, Inc.

Alex Comfort. **A Good Age**. Simon and Schuster, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Excellent resource book of essays on the nature and circumstance of being an older person.

L.J. Frankel and B.B. Richard. **Be Alive As Long As You Live**. A guide to exercises for active, inactive, and bedridden persons. Lippincott and Crowell, 521 5th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Florida Maxwell-Scott. **The Measure of My Days**. North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies. State College Station, Fargo, North Dakota 58102.

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**Dynamic Years** (bi-monthly periodical). Action for Independent Maturity. 215 Long Beach Blvd., Long Beach, California 90802.

**Modern Maturity** (bi-monthly periodical). Membership only. American Association of Retired Persons. 215 Long Beach Blvd., Long Beach, California 90802.

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