

# 'Fire keepers': Women elders share advice for healthy aging

September 28 2023, by Gillian Rutherford

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Aging Well Tips:

Strategies shared by the women of Pigeon Lake and Maskwacis

PHYSICAL WELLNESS: Taking care of your body is a large component of self-care. It should be something you enjoy and not feel like an obligation.

One woman talked about her 96 yr old Mosom, who has taught her through her life — he worked hard all his life, his job, yard, house. Now he works mainly around the house to stay alive. He has taught and modelled an active life. This tells his granddaughter he believes that the key to remaining healthy and well is to keep active.

Listen: Listen to your body and seek help if needed. Get enough sleep (look naps). Pay attention as you get older.

Exercise: Walk, swim, garden... Do things that you enjoy to maintain your physical fitness.

These strategies come from the Aging Wellness Toolkit. The toolkit is a part of a research study, Increasing Mature Women's Wellness in an Indigenous Community. The toolkit was developed in collaboration with the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary.

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MENTAL WELLNESS: Nourishing and challenging your mind. It expands your knowledge, learning a new skill can be a type of self-care activity for the mind.

Brains keep changing. It is important to keep learning and challenge your mind.

We are all human: We are all human. Don't be hard on yourself, be kind. You are allowed to make mistakes. No one is perfect, we are all human.

Self-Talk: Provide yourself with positive affirmation. You need to look in the mirror and tell yourself that you're stronger than you think you are. Other people don't often say positive things so you need to provide that input yourself.

Believe: Believe in yourself. Be your best supporter.

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EMOTIONAL WELLNESS: Becoming more in-tune with your emotions and feelings. It's like checking in with yourself, becoming more mindful of triggers and thinking patterns and finding ways to work through them rather than bottling them up.

People get stuck because they can't define their emotions, you have to find ways to express emotions: laugh, cry, be happy. Let yourself experience and release emotions.

Gratitude: Always be in a state of gratitude, even for small things. Life is full of gifts.

Honesty: You need to honestly and openly acknowledge your problems so that they can be addressed.

Talk: It is important to find someone to talk to, someone to listen to you.

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SPIRITUAL WELLNESS: Nourishing your spirit, striving for inner peace and seeking to find purpose and meaning in life. Doesn't necessarily have to relate to religion, although it can for some people.

Ceremonies: Ceremonies are a constant reminder of unconditional love. You do not need an invitation to attend ceremonies.

Blessings: Slow down and enjoy your blessings. A woman explained to her 13 year old granddaughter who wanted to be older, that 'you'll only be 13 for one year. Don't wish to grow older too soon.' Find the good in life.

Pray: Pray, no matter your religion. We all pray to the same Creator. Prayers can be said anywhere.

Smudge: Smudge as part of self-care.

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BALANCE: As healthy adults that are aging well, it is our role to teach our children and young people the importance of caring for ourselves and having balance in our lives, which includes building a supportive community. When we care for ourselves, as role models, we can teach the younger generations to be calm, peaceful, thoughtful, open-hearted, healthy adults.

Aging: "May you have gray hair" There is something positive about aging. It's a blessing. "I'm not old... YET!"

Family: Family dinners and celebrations are a very important way to pass on knowledge.

Finding Good: Everything happens for a reason. It is up to you to find the good.

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Aging well cards. Credit: BMC Women's Health (2023). DOI:

10.1186/s12905-023-02453-6

Healthy aging is all about balance for older Nehiyawak/Plains Cree women in Maskwacîs, Alberta, according to community-based participatory research based on sharing circles recently published in [\*BMC Women's Health\*](#).

"It is important to have balance and equilibrium in our life," said one sharing circle participant. "The body cries out if you don't have balance and you start to experience sickness and you will not be fully able to provide support to your [family members](#). Be mindful and present to see when the balance in your life is off.

"It's important to address all aspects of wellness daily in order to age healthy and well: spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically."

Participated in the sharing circles were 36 seniors—mostly [women](#) and a few men. They were led by a research team from Maskwacîs Health Services, the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, under the guidance of a Women Elders Advisory Committee in 2017.

"Women elders are the fire keepers of the home. They help the generations before and after them, like a touchstone for the family, helping to keep them together and sharing traditions," says Luwana Listener, the community research coordinator for the project, who also lives in Maskwacîs.

"The Elders are such a valuable resource and blessing to the community because every single one of them has their own expertise and gifts to share with the community."

The sharing circles were held in three locations within the four nations that make up Maskwacîs—Ermineskin Cree Nation, Louis Bull Tribe, Montana First Nation and Samson Cree First Nation—as well as in the nearby community of Pigeon Lake.

"Everybody had a chance to talk and they were really wide-ranging discussions," notes Sue Ross, former Cavarzan Chair in Women's Health Research and professor emeritus in obstetrics and gynecology.

"It was a privilege to be there just to listen to other people's experiences."

The first Maskwacîs project was about the women's experience of menopause but the research team soon realized the women had much more valuable knowledge to share about how to age well.

At first some were reluctant to participate in the sharing circles because of the history of unethical medical research within Indigenous communities, Listener says, while others felt aging was a taboo subject.

"People were hesitant to talk at first but when we offered the sharing circles, it changed that perspective, knowing that research doesn't have to be harmful. It can be strength-based. It can be meaningful and beneficial for the entire community," Listener says.

Each event began with a quote from Ojibway-Anishinaabe Elder Jim Dumont: "Wellness from an Indigenous perspective is a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of body, mind, emotion, and spirit. Central to wellness is belief in one's connection to language, land, beings of creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment."

Using the four aspects of the Medicine Wheel as a framework to guide

the sessions, the participants identified four key strategies they used to age well:

- Physical—keeping active to remain well
- Mental—learning new skills to nourish your mind
- Emotional—laughing, crying and being happy
- Spiritual—practicing Nehiyawak traditional ways

These results were shared through community meetings, and a booklet with historic photographs is in the works.

Participants expressed fears about losing their mobility and hearing, or developing dementia as they aged, but they also described how they turned negative experiences into positive ones by using these strategies. For example, one woman reported sometimes not being able to move when she wakes up in the morning. She gives thanks to the Creator for giving her her body, and then all of a sudden her pain is gone and she's able to move around, Listener remembers.

All of the women feel a responsibility to pass along their knowledge and advice to younger family members as part of [healthy aging](#).

"Even if they don't live with their grandchildren, they provide a huge amount of support and they get a lot of personal satisfaction from being able to help," notes Ross, who is a member of the Women and Children's Health Research Institute (WCHRI).

Listener, a WCHRI affiliate member, says she is grateful the women have also chosen to share their wisdom with the greater community through this research project.

"They've given me this path to follow so that I will be able to be a successful elder in my community when I reach that age," she says. "I

now have all of these wonderful strategies that all these people shared. It's just a blessing to me."

**More information:** Luwana Listener et al, Nehiyawak (Cree) women's strategies for aging well: community-based participatory research in Maskwacîs, Alberta, Canada, by the Sohkitehew (Strong Heart) group, *BMC Women's Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1186/s12905-023-02453-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-023-02453-6)

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