

# SECRETS OF CENTENARIANS

by Hector M. Earle



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**A**s teachers we are caregivers, caring for our most precious resource—our children and future leaders of tomorrow. But in our noble profession of helping others, we forget sometimes to look after ourselves. The result can be ill health and early burnout.

According to some health experts, living a long, healthy life is influenced more by how you live than the genes you were born with. Genetic specialists estimate that the so-called longevity gene (that gene that you inherited from your parents and grandparents) influence how long you live by less than 33 per cent. The rest is a result of habits and lifestyle.

Those of us who have been around long enough know that health fads come and go with changes and ideas coming full circle (not unlike education outcomes and school curricula). Just go to any bookstore and you will find a myriad of books and magazines on ways to stay healthy with much of the advice still waiting to be scientifically proven.

Perhaps then we should go to the living source of what it takes to live a long, healthy life—centenarians, the people who are indeed living examples on the habits of longevity. While most teachers can't expect to live to be one hundred, there are certain things we can do to increase the odds of living long and enjoying the retirement that we so deservedly look forward to.

What then are the secrets of centenarians? According to Dr. William Sears in his book, *Prime-Time Health*, there are a number of commonalities in reaching the ripe old age of one hundred and beyond. The following are all longevity boosting habits that the majority of centenarians have in common.

**They move.** Centenarians spend much of their day moving around, whether it through exercise programs, in their garden or plain old walking. They don't sit around letting their muscles weaken and joints become stiff. Movement seems to be one of the major keys to their longevity, and increasing evidence suggests we need to move around as much as we need to exercise.

**They love.** They give and receive love and stay connected with their loved ones. Staying connected with family and friends and engaging in meaningful activities is important.

**They're lean.** As they age, centenarians tend to maintain muscle and gain little body fat. Maintaining muscle seems to strengthen the body and increase the metabolism.

**They eat less.** Centenarians tend to eat 10 to 20 percent fewer daily calories than people on the standard North American diet. This caloric reduction does not mean forfeiting nutrition by eating less food, but rather eating more whole foods and cutting back on the junk.

**They graze.** They eat smaller nutritional meals more often and take more time to eat. Dr. Sears coined the phrase "eat twice as often, half as much, chew twice as long." The keys to healthy eating are three words: healthier, smaller and slower.

**They eat pure.** They eat real foods (mostly fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fish) and shun processed, packaged foods and chemical additives.

**They laugh.** Centenarians have a tendency to not take themselves too seriously and to enjoy themselves. Humour to them is very therapeutic. In other words, they adhere to the old saying that laughter is the best medicine.

**They're spiritual.** Faith beliefs and practices are important to them. They enjoy a sense of spiritual belonging and live purposeful lives.

**They're flexible.** They accept the fact that gains and losses are part of life's journey and adapt to the inevitable changes that come their way. "The most adaptable live the longest," said Henry Rempel, who lived to be one hundred years old.

**They serve.** Volunteering and ministering to others' needs is high on their "to do" lists. They have learned the wonderful rewards that come from helping others and seem to thrive on the helper's high.

**They think.** Centenarians stay engaged mentally and are not afraid to learn new things. They challenge their minds with reading and mental exercise, such as Sudoku, crossword puzzles and other problem solving activities. Staying alert mentally has kept their minds sharp.

**They go slow.** Okinawans, people who live on Okinawa Island in Japan, live one of the longest and healthiest lives in the world. Documentaries on these wonderful people show they are hard workers but take their time in completing their tasks. Lessons from the Okinawans teach us that we need to slow down and not get caught up in the "hurry sickness."

**They rest.** Quality sleep and periods of down time are very important. Centenarians have learned that the body need times of rest for relaxation, reflection, repair and rejuvenation.

**They're up!** Numerous studies show that positive thinking and upbeat attitudes have tremendous benefits to our minds and immune systems. Centenarians are known to be positive thinkers, not worrywarts. They figure, "If I can't change it, I'm not going to worry about it."

**They plan.** Many of us when we retire seem to go from the one extreme to the other. In other words, we go from an extremely busy, active life to one of idleness and ease. This may be good for the short term but studies have shown that even in our retirement, we need to plan for this part of our lives and still be involved in meaningful activities. "I need a project" is a common refrain of most centenarians. They have a reason to wake up in the morning.

In short, centenarians are active, healthy, engaged, and focused, enjoying a long life of abilities and a short life of disabilities. Just what the doctor ordered!

