

Happy talk

Link between optimism and aging explored

By Ann Efimetz

What is happiness?

That's the question Dr. Dan Longo of Colonial Behavioral Health Services asked members of the Senior Advocate Network Group who met recently at Sentara Williamsburg Regional Medical Center.

He presented a program, "Aging Well: The Importance of Optimism and Happiness" and opened with that question.

Those attending began sharing their opinions. One said 'Peace.' Some said 'Contentment,' and someone jokingly interjected, 'Shopping.'

Whatever people's perception of happiness is, according to research, attaining and keeping it has less to do with wealth or material possessions, but more to do with satisfaction with one's life and accomplishments.

Happiness by definition means 'good fortune,' or 'pleasure.' But in order for happiness to become a way of life, there has to be more involved than just luck or singular experiences.

"You may be in a good mood and then get a flat tire or an unexpected bill and that goes out the window," he said. "Happiness is complex. There are many factors that lead to the mood of happiness."

The study of happiness has become popular. In the 1960's Longo said not many psychologists studied happiness. Now, it is what he described as a "huge field" of study.

That's because research has shown that the happier, more optimistic people are, the better they are in dealing with the curves life throws them, illness and other challenges.

What's really startling is that he quoted preliminary statistics that have found people who are happier may outlive pessimistic folks by some 7.5 years.

"Being happy has better results than stopping smoking or weight management," he said. "It may have the best outcome of all."

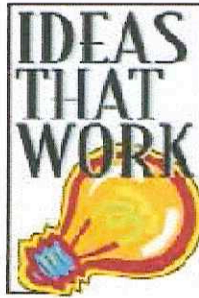
But happiness isn't easy to come by. It involves many aspects of a person's life, even where you live. According to a survey of the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index Hawaii is "the happiest" state in the country, followed by Wyoming and North Dakota. Virginia falls somewhere in the middle. The unhappiest? West Virginia, followed by Kentucky and Mississippi.

And Americans aren't the happiest people globally, either. According to the World Database of Happiness, Costa Rica is the happiest country in the world, followed by Denmark and Iceland.

Being young also isn't a factor. In fact, a 2010 Gallup Poll found that among the people surveyed between 18-85, people who were over 50 were the happiest.

"And why is that?" he asked. "Maybe you are in a good place in your life. Maybe you have a good marriage and the children are grown. By age 50 most people have established themselves. And at

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age 50 there is a change about how we feel about life."

He noted that over the past decade there has been a huge increase in depression and mood disorders in youth. Why is unclear.

"Being content as a child is becoming more difficult," he said.

"Moodiness is normal and part of life.



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Dan Longo of Colonial Behavioral Health spoke about the importance of happiness and optimism in aging well.

But these are actual disorders and conditions in kids. And the incidence has gone through the roof."

As people age, Longo said we become more reflective on the past. How we define our happiness has a lot to do with what our past life has been and our how we look at our experiences.

"Perception changes as you get older," he said. "The more you look at your life through rosy lenses, the happier you will be. The older you are, and the more satisfied with your past life, the happier you are," he said.

So how can you become a happier person?

Longo said there are some aspects of happiness that can be cultivated. They include being grateful and satisfied with what you have as well as practicing optimistic thinking.

"If you are not feeling happy, you can work on it," he said. "You can count your blessings and use your strengths. Most unhappy people look at their negatives and not their strengths."

And kindness counts. "The kinder you are, the happier you are," he said. "Kindness generates a positive state of well being."

Prayer and spirituality also plays a major role in overall happiness and health. Research has also found that people who pray and have belief in a higher power do better post-surgery or recover from illness quicker.

"They cope well and because they tend to be more optimistic and have a higher sense of hope," he said. "And that makes a huge difference." □