

The new status symbol for baby boomers: longevity

JUDITH TIMSON

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

April 29, 2008 at 9:07 AM EDT

Forget monster homes or sleek condos, tech toys or even upscale vacations; longevity is the new status symbol for baby boomers.

As author Michael Kinsley says in a recent essay on the subject in the New Yorker, "the last boomer game is about to start - the game of competitive longevity."

The only contest that matters in the end, he argues, is about life itself. "And the standard is clear: Mine is longer than yours."

It stands to reason that as the boomers turn 60, they should be thinking exhaustively, aggressively and even obnoxiously not just about how to stay young (soy milkshakes and Botox), but how to stay old.

We've been on the aging-well kick for some time now, turning seniors' residences into all-inclusive wonderlands and visions of retirement into walking-the-beach utopias.

We've heard about divorce at 70, sex at 80 and even, I'm sure somewhere, skydiving at 90. But all that quality-of-life stuff supposes you're around to enjoy it in the first place.

And longevity can be an alarming concept: If you're going to live longer, which many of us apparently are, you'd better have ample financial means, not to mention toned trapezoid muscles that will allow you to get off the couch occasionally.

In a new book *The Blue Zone*, Minnesota author Dan Buettner, expanding on a series he did for National Geographic magazine, offers secrets of living to 100, from what he calls "pockets of longevity" around the world, places where there is a higher-than-average concentration of centenarians.

Mr. Buettner says our genes account for only 25 per cent of why some live long and healthy lives. The other 75 per cent of what determines life expectancy is based on lifestyle and "everyday life choices."

The author discovered that folks who live to 100 have a lot in common, whether it's a shepherd in Sardinia, an elder in Okinawa or a Seventh-day Adventist in Loma Linda, Calif.

They thrive on gentle, everyday exercise, a plant-based diet (little red meat), a strong social network, a reason to get up in the morning (religious faith plays a part in this), and a feeling of being valued as they age. They also put their family - or any loved ones - first in their lives, which brings them sustenance as they grow old.

Then there is "Vitamin S": smiling. According to one researcher, people over 40 tend to get less happy with age until they reach 80, and then they're happy again. (Thank God.) Thriving elders, Mr. Buettner writes, are "not worried about getting something in the future or sad about having missed something in the past."

After I read the book, I went online to take the **Blue Zone Vitality Compass test**, which estimates your life expectancy based on 35 questions, including whether you have cancer, diabetes or heart disease; how sad or angry you are; and how satisfied you are with your marriage.

The Vitality Compass told me that I am biologically seven years younger than my actual age, that I have a life expectancy of 95.3, and that I can expect to stay healthy until 86.

By living a healthy lifestyle (I've never smoked), I've added 11.5 years to my life expectancy, it said.

The new status symbol for baby boomers: longevity

I probably could have come up with the same estimate without the quiz. My maternal great-grandmother and grandmother both lived until 96, my mother until 90. So far, I have no experience with the big three: heart disease, cancer and stroke.

And so I have the guardedly optimistic sense that I am headed for a long life. When I was younger, longevity used to be, for me, a newspaper picture of a gnarled old face from somewhere in the world with a headline saying: "Oldest woman celebrates 106th birthday." A grotesque curiosity rather than a role model. Nothing for me to emulate.

But now, because I have arrived in middle age, the idea of longevity has become for me a poignant awareness of its antithesis: Some of us are dropping out of the marathon early. Not too long ago, I attended the memorial service for a beloved colleague, exactly my age, and felt stunned into sadness that because of a virulent cancer, she was no longer alive and vibrant in this world.

There was nothing she could have done to prevent her early death, and so I think I won't pore obsessively over these longevity manuals. There are no guarantees.

Besides, I prefer the live exhibits: Not too long ago, my husband and I accompanied three elderly women out to dinner - their combined ages totalled 257, with the eldest of them, at 93, deservedly being called a babe. She looked gorgeous and fashionable - they all did - and all three yakked for hours about culture and politics and life.

By 11 p.m. I began surreptitiously looking at my watch, yearning for bed. But they were still going strong. Finally I sent my husband to get the car. It wasn't until after we'd seen the ladies safely off that I realized I'd had the only lesson in longevity I needed.

Keep going, with gusto, until they take you home.

Dan Buettner's 9 secrets to longevity

- Move naturally. Don't be a weekend exercise warrior. Be active without having to think about it - climb stairs, walk, garden, do gentle aerobics.
- *Hara hachi bu*. A Confucian saying reminding you to stop eating when your stomach is 80-per-cent full.
- Eat four to six vegetable servings a day and avoid meat and processed food.
- Drink red wine (in moderation).
- Have a strong sense of purpose.
- Take time to relieve stress. Whether it's observing the Sabbath, for the religious, or meditating or having a siesta for the rest of us, we need to downshift on a regular basis.
- Belong. Participate in a spiritual community.
- Put loved ones first. Make family a priority.
- Join the right tribe. Hang with others who practise a healthy lifestyle.

Compiled by Judith Timson