

# Surfing for Life Discussion Guide



This is the abbreviated on-line *Surfing for Life* Discussion Guide. The complete Guide (available through the order form—video & t-shirt link) includes resources, books, journals and organizations involved in aging.

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[www.calendow.org](http://www.calendow.org)

Introduction This guide is a tool for instructors and facilitators leading a discussion about the aging-related issues addressed in *Surfing for Life*. The film has been widely used to engage students, professionals and older adults interested in healthy and successful aging. The film can stimulate a lively discussion about the benefits of various health practices (physical, social, emotional, and spiritual) and the best lifestyle pathways to achieve a successful old age.

**Prior to showing *Surfing for Life (SFL)*, the following introductory remarks will help your audience get the most educational benefit from viewing and discussing the film:**

*Surfing for Life* is an award winning 55-minute documentary about healthy aging and lives well lived from the unique perspective of older men and women surfers who range in age from 60 to 93. Through interviews, archival and present day footage of the film's subjects living their lives, an entertaining and inspirational image emerges of successful aging. For surfers and non-surfers alike, *SFL* celebrates the human potential of later life and encourages the viewer to pursue whatever activities, hopes and dreams that inspire them.

*Surfing for Life* profiles three women and six men who share a love of surfing. Some of these individuals are legends in the sport of surfing and were filmed extensively in their earlier years. All are prime examples of healthy, vital aging and have interesting and entertaining stories to share.

The film weaves together portraits of each surfer and concludes with a section on how they deal with the challenges of aging. Key aspects of healthy and successful aging are incorporated in their stories.

Unlike most films about healthy aging, "experts" are not included. Instead, the older surfers' lives embody the themes of healthy aging. While watching the film, identify the key aspects of healthy aging (physical, social, emotional, and spiritual) that the film's subjects exemplify. After the screening, we'll share our findings with each other.

**Note to teachers**  
See list of major themes of healthy aging to be found in the film. Share this list with your group members AFTER they've had a chance to identify key aspects on their own.

## Discussion Questions Before Viewing

- 1 How does the media portray older people?
- 2 Do you feel surfing is an appropriate activity for people over 60? If so, why?; and if not, why not?
- 3 Describe what comes to your mind when you think about older surfers?

### Note to teacher/presenter

If you have a large group, it may be helpful to divide into small groups and give participants 5-10 minutes to discuss each question below. Provide either the group or each participant with a written list of the questions. Instruct each group to select a group facilitator, a group recorder, and a group spokesperson to share the comments of the small group with the larger group when they reconvene. Ask for a volunteer from the class to record each of the small groups' comments on an easel pad when the large group reconvenes.

## Discussion Questions After Viewing

- 1 What key aspects of healthy and successful aging did the surfers exhibit through their appearance, behavior, stories and comments?  
Please relate film scenes to your comments.
- 2 What surprised you about the film?
- 3 How did you feel after watching the film?
- 4 Who was your favorite character and why?
- 5 How did the surfers respond to the challenges of aging?
- 6 How do these surfers' stories relate to your own aging or to the aging of someone you know?
- 7 What attributes do the film's subjects have in common?
- 8 How are these surfers typical in their choices and how are they atypical?

Cover page photos:

top: Peter Cole (age 69) from 1967;

below from left:

John 'Doc' Ball (now age 93 – circa 1935),

Eve Fletcher, (74), 'Doc' Ball,

Rabbit Kekai (79), Woody Brown (88),

John Kelly (81).

Woody Brown (Age 88)

## Helpful Rules for Group Discussion

Leave judgments outside the door.

Speak one  
at a time.

Honor confidentiality.

Speak up so  
everyone  
can hear you.

There are no “right” or “wrong” opinions.

If you can't hear  
someone,  
please let us know.

Speak from a  
personal  
perspective,  
also known as  
the “I” position.

## Key Aspects of Healthy and Successful Aging in *Surfing For Life*

### Healthy acceptance and management of the aging process

One of the principle goals of the film is to portray the subjects not as great examples of “staying young” but rather of “staying well.” Our society has many deep-seated fears about growing old and, as a result, many people find it difficult to cope with the challenges of aging. In *Surfing for Life (SFL)*, Fred Van Dyke says, quite honestly, “Psychologically, aging, for me, is the pits.” He is deeply troubled by his decision to quit surfing twenty-foot waves due to growing fear in surf of that size. But later he says, “I am slowing down, but if I'm going to get old, I might as well dig it.” He then decides to make ten foot waves his limit. John Kelly adapts to a balance problem by switching to a boogie board to ride waves in a prone position. But, the key is that he continues to practice the sport he loves. Part of healthy and successful aging is to acknowledge the changes that come with aging, to manage them as well as possible and then to move on with our lives.

### Reminiscence

Remembering past events that are meaningful to us is a natural process as we get older. It also contributes to many social, emotional and spiritual aspects of our health by reaffirming our sense of self, our values, joy, perspective, self-esteem, and strength to cope with challenges in the here and now. Many examples of reminiscence occur throughout the film: Woody Brown recalling the catamaran rides he gave to his customers at Waikiki in the late '40s and '50s; John Kelly remembering December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor; and Eve recalling her “surfari” with Marge Calhoun to Hawai'i in 1958.

### Intergenerational involvement/mentoring

Younger people need caring and knowledgeable older people (of all ages) in their lives. Increasingly, young people and older people don't interact and this has a diminishing impact on all involved. In the film, you can see the benefits of intergenerational connections when Rabbit Kekai is teaching the young woman how to surf, or when Shay Bintliff is playing with her granddaughter in the pool, or when Anona Napoleon is playing in the surf or paddling an outrigger canoe with her children and grandchildren.

### Diet

A strong link exists between diet and overall well-being. Fred Van Dyke talks about how he was “beginning to see the end of the tunnel” and responded by “...better nutrition and getting in better shape.” Woody refers to diet when he says, “I want to take care of this beautiful body.”

### Exercise

Like diet, exercise is critical to our overall well-being. Exercise is part of the daily routine of every surfer featured in the film.

### Stress reduction

Dealing with stress is a challenge we will face throughout our lives and older people are not exempt. Surfing for 'Doc' Ball or Rabbit Kekai (and for any surfer in the world) “relieves stress.” It is a good recipe: exercise plus “beautiful nature” plus doing something active that you enjoy equals very effective stress relief.

### Family relationships

It is no secret that being part of a loving family or network of friends contributes to good health. This is demonstrated during Anona's “Napoleon's Holiday,” when Shay links hands with her two sons while surfing the same wave (“a once in life time experience”), and when Fred talks about his spouse as they walk down the beach hand-in-hand.

### Life long friendships

As we get older, we not only have the family we're born with but also the family we choose — namely our long-time (and new) friends. The friendships between Fred Van Dyke and Peter Cole, and between Rabbit Kekai and Woody Brown are timeless and highly valued by each of them.

# Key Aspects of Healthy and Successful Aging in *Surfing For Life*

## A sense of community

At the very least, our social and emotional health suffers when we are isolated and alone. Being part of a community (or several communities) such as a church, a work group, or a club provides us emotional support, enriching relationships, a sense of belonging and many other benefits. Social isolation is too common among older people. All *SFL* surfers are part of many different communities: John Kelly's *Save Our Surf*; Woody Brown's colleagues at Hale Makua Adult Day Health Care Center (ADHC); Shay Bintliff's work mates at the hospital; and for all of them, the "surfing community."

## Being of service to others

It has been well documented that people feel better when they are contributing something of value to others. Many older people find themselves thinking that they have nothing to offer or they have the experience of not being asked by others if they want to contribute their time and skills. Particularly after a person retires, he/she runs the risk of sinking into this feeling. Woody Brown "gives love all around" at Hale Makua ADHC where he serves as a Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) volunteer. Rabbit teaches young people how to surf, Fred and Peter were teachers and John Kelly remains an environmental activist by raising public awareness of potentially damaging coastal development proposals in Hawai'i.

## Spirituality/elemental connection with nature

As we age, most of us have a tendency to pay more attention to the spiritual part of life. Woody Brown asserts that "doing for others as you would have others do for you is the spiritual way of life." His community service work is clearly linked to his religious/spiritual values. When Anona, Shay and Eve share their profound nature experiences in the film, they are talking about the "spiritual" part of surfing – a type of communion with nature that all surfers share but experience to a greater degree as they get older. The stronger our spiritual health is, the better our overall health tends to be. Appreciating and interacting with the beauty and power of nature can contribute significantly to our overall well-being. Surfing has clearly given the surfers featured in *SFL* an elemental connection with nature, and, for many others, an elemental connection with God.

## Peak experiences

The late, great psychologist Abraham Maslow talked about the hierarchy of human needs, beginning with the most basic: physiological needs (food, water, etc.); safety needs (security, stability); love and belonging (affiliation, acceptance); esteem (success, status); and, finally, self-actualization or "fulfillment of our human potential." Having our more basic needs met, he theorized, helps us to achieve a state of self-actualization, at least for a brief time.

During times of self-actualization, people often describe "peak experiences" or moments of great joy and insight when they felt in harmony with, as well as in awe of, nature, God, and/or their fellow human beings. An example in the film is Fred's story when "everything came together for one second" as he rode that huge and perfect wave at Waimea Bay many years ago. Eve and Shay discussed their peak experiences: Eve surfed the same wave with dolphins; and Shay, while surfing in "the warm, loving ocean" saw the first light of day hit the snow atop of Mauna Kea. All of us have an innate drive to become self-actualized and have peak experiences throughout life. We can increase the likelihood of having such experiences by taking care of ourselves and continuing to pursue activities we enjoy as we age.

## Passionate involvement in an activity

Many people believe that as we age, we become less passionate about life in general. The surfers featured in *SFL* dispel this belief convincingly. They are clearly passionate about surfing as well as other things in their lives, such as John's environmental activism, Fred's love of his wife Joan-Marie and Shay's love for her sons and granddaughter. Passionate involvement in an activity (or in a relationship or community) is one of the most important keys to healthy aging.

## Note

This list is available as a PDF file on [www.surfingforlife.com](http://www.surfingforlife.com). It is not intended as an exhaustive list of Keys to Healthy Aging. You and your group are encouraged to add to this list.

Rabbit Kekai (Age 79)  
Top: 1985, Bottom: 1995.



# Suggested Class Projects

## Images of Aging In The Media Today

**Background** *SFL* portrays elders who are capable, vital and living life to the fullest. While all forms of media are getting better at portraying older people, they still have a long way to go before elders are shown in a uniformly reasonable way that does not reinforce ageist stereotypes.

**Learning Goals** Students will gain a greater understanding of how images of aging are portrayed in the media and the impact these images have on the public perception of elders.

**Materials Needed** Have students gather: various magazines and newspapers; radio with tape recorder; a VCR with programmable recording capacity for recording weekday TV shows and advertisements; and a computer with access to the internet. For video and audio tapes, the teacher (or student) would need to arrange for another VCR or audio tape recorder to dub selected materials onto another tape for presentation to the class.

**Process** Organize students into four committees: magazine committee; newspaper committee; VCR-TV committee; and the Internet committee. Each committee should have a few weeks to collect examples of how the media portrays elders in both ageist and non-ageist ways. Each committee will present their collected examples in a class a few weeks after the assignment.

**Alternative Process** During a two-hour class, have students focus on newspapers, magazines and/or the Internet and select examples during the first hour. Then, have students share their findings during the last hour of class.

## Other Possible Projects in Brief

Interview senior athletes in the students' nearby community.

Interview seniors who participate in an exercise class.

Create a list of ten well-known seniors who are great examples of healthy and successful aging and discuss what attributes they have in common.

Choose several of the discussion questions and assign them as writing assignments.

Give Palmore's *Facts on Aging Quiz* to friends or strangers (true and false questions related to common myths of aging). Collect aggregate scores in class to measure the surrounding community's "Aging I.Q." Discuss results.

# The Facts On Aging Quiz

(True/False Format)

by Erdman  
Palmore, Ph.D.

1 The majority of old people (age 65+) are senile (have defective memory, are disoriented, or demented).

2 The five senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell) all tend to weaken in old age.

3 The majority of old people have no interest in, nor capacity for, sexual relations.

4 Lung vital capacity tends to decline in old age.

5 The majority of old people feel miserable most of the time.

6 Physical strength tends to decline in old age.

7 At least one tenth of the aged are living in long-stay institutions (such as nursing homes, mental hospitals, homes for the aged, etc.).

8 Aged drivers have fewer accidents per driver than those under age 65.

9 Older workers usually cannot work as effectively as younger workers.

10 Over three fourths of the aged are healthy enough to do their normal activities without help.

11 The majority of old people are unable to adapt to change.

12 Old people usually take longer to learn something new.

13 Depression is more frequent among the elderly than among younger people.

14 Older people tend to react slower than younger people.

15 In general, old people tend to be pretty much alike.

16 The majority of old people say they are seldom bored.

17 The majority of old people are socially isolated.

18 Older workers have fewer accidents than younger workers.

19 Over 20% of the population are now age 65 or over.

20 The majority of medical practitioners tend to give low priority to the aged.

21 The majority of old people have incomes below the poverty line (as defined by the federal government).

22 The majority of old people are working or would like to have some kind of work to do (including housework and volunteer work).

23 Old people tend to become more religious as they age.

24 The majority of old people say they are seldom irritated or angry.

25 The health and economic status of old people will be about the same or worse in the year 2010 (compared with younger people).

## Key to scoring

All the odd-numbered items are false, and all the even-numbered are true.

For brief essays that document the facts behind each of the above questions, please see "The Facts on Aging Quiz," Second Edition, Erdman Palmore, Springer Publishing, 1998.

This quiz is available as a PDF file on [www.surfingforlife.com](http://www.surfingforlife.com).

## Ten Tips for Healthy Aging

### Additional information about healthy aging

An increasing amount of information about healthy aging is available on the Internet; in books, journals, and magazines; and on TV. What follows is just a small sampling of what can be obtained with just a little bit of searching. The following summaries are available as PDF files on [www.surfingforlife.com](http://www.surfingforlife.com) and can be copied onto transparencies and used with an overhead projector to present additional information about health and aging following a screening of *Surfing for Life*.

- 1 Eat a balanced diet, including five helpings of fruits and vegetables a day.
- 2 Exercise regularly (check with a doctor before starting an exercise program).
- 3 Get regular health check-ups.
- 4 Don't smoke (it's never too late to quit.)
- 5 Practice safety habits at home to prevent falls and fractures. Always wear your seatbelt in a car.
- 6 Stay in contact with family and friends. Stay active through work, play, and community.
- 7 Avoid overexposure to the sun and the cold.
- 8 If you drink, moderation is the key. When you drink, let someone else drive.
- 9 Keep personal and financial records in order to simplify budgeting and investing. Plan long-term housing and money needs.
- 10 Keep a positive attitude toward life. Do things that make you happy.

From Age Page: Life's Extension: Science or Science Fiction? National Institute on Aging's Web Site at: [www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/agepages/lifeext.html](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/agepages/lifeext.html)

## Exercise: Feeling Fit for Life

Adults, young and old can help put an end to a major public health enemy – lack of physical activity. The crime? Adding to disease and disability.

### Here are the Facts:

Exercise can help older people feel better and enjoy life more, even those who think they're too old or too out of shape. Most older adults don't get enough physical activity. Lack of physical activity and poor diet, taken together, are the second largest underlying cause of death in the United States. (Smoking is the #1 cause.) Regular exercise can improve some diseases and disabilities in older people who already have them. It can improve mood and relieve depression, too.

Staying physically active on a regular, permanent basis can help prevent or delay certain diseases (like some types of cancer, heart disease, or diabetes) and disabilities as people grow older.

From Age Page: Exercise: National Institute on Aging's Web Site at: [www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/agepages/exercise.html](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/agepages/exercise.html)

## Transcendence, Spirituality, and Legacies

– Transcending the material and physical limitations of existence through ritual and spiritual means is an especially important aspect of aging.

– Gerotranscendence is a theory, proposed by Lars Tornstam, which implies a natural shift in concerns that occurs in the aging process. Elders are thought to spend more time in reflection, less on materialistic concerns and to find more satisfaction in life. This is an attempt to define aging not by the standards of young and middle adulthood but as having distinctive characteristics of its own.

– Spiritual healing has ancient religious roots, but scientists are now recognizing and accepting the power of the mind in restoring health and, if not restoring health, enhancing one's ability to cope.

– Elders commonly have a high level of interest in the spiritual and religious elements of life.

– Life satisfaction, happiness, morale, and health are all related in some ways to beliefs, hope, and motivation that may be derived from a spiritual awareness.

From "Toward Healthy Aging," fifth edition, by Priscilla Ebersole and Patricia Hess

## Longevity and the Power of a Healthy Lifestyle

### Adopt Healthy Lifestyle Habits

The life expectancy of our nation's people has increased. Americans are living longer and in greater numbers, reflecting a demographic reality that will surge in the 21st century as the baby boom generation ages. While it once seemed that health problems are inevitable in older age, there is conclusive evidence that many diseases can, in fact, be controlled or, even better, prevented. Thus, it is almost never too late to adopt healthy lifestyle habits.

Positive changes in lifestyle have been shown to preserve function, delay or prevent the onset of disability, and improve the quality of life. The good news is that virtually all older people can reap health benefits if they:

- Improve their diet and nutrition;
- Maintain an appropriate weight;
- Stop smoking;
- Stick with regular physical activity and exercise;
- Get regular health checkups;
- Keep physically and mentally active and socially engaged.

According to the World Health Organization, health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over and improve their health. Disease prevention is the other side of the coin and includes measures to prevent the occurrence of disease – such as risk factor reduction, to arrest its progress, and to reduce its consequences.

Even persons with chronic conditions, such as arthritis or diabetes, can benefit from healthy lifestyle changes. For example, some of the most common effects of these conditions can be delayed, reduced, or better controlled, resulting in better health, increased productivity, and an increased likelihood of successful aging. The ultimate goal of health promotion and disease prevention activities is to increase the quality and years of healthy life.

From Age Page: Life Extension: Science or Science Fiction? From National Institute on Aging's Web Site at: [www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/agepages](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/aoa/pages/agepages)



For More Information about  
*Surfing for Life*

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