

THE MIND

# SO YOU'VE HAD IT ROUGH? GOOD!

HOW WE APPROACH  
HARDSHIP COULD  
TELL US HOW  
LONG WE'LL LIVE

By Markam Heid

# DURING WORLD WAR II,

an American woman named Shelley Smith Mydans reported on the conflict for *Life* magazine. Along with her husband, the photographer Carl Mydans, Shelley documented battles in both Europe and the Pacific.

Midway through the war, the Mydans were captured in the Philippines. The Japanese held them in POW camps in Manila and Shanghai. But despite spending two years as prisoners of war, both Mydans survived and went on to live long and productive lives. Shelley lived to 86, while Carl made it all the way to 97.

Many who survived the war were not so fortunate. A U.S. serviceman named Philip was also in the Pacific theater during World War II. Even before the war, Philip was prone to anxiety and "catastrophizing"—always predicting the worst. After he returned home, these traits intensified. Philip drank heavily and separated from his wife. Frustrated and resentful about his time overseas, blaming it for his failed marriage, Philip escalated his drinking. He tended not to exercise, and he was occasionally depressed. He died at age 64 of a heart attack.

The Mydans' and Philip's very different stories were recounted in *The Longevity Project*, a book that summarizes an 80-year study based on interviews and health data collected

from approximately 1,500 people—each followed from youth until death. Its authors came to an unlikely conclusion. "We found that many people who lived through hard times went on to live long lives," says coauthor Leslie Martin, PhD, a professor of psychology at California's La Sierra University.

Unlike Philip, for whom the war seemed to push life onto a self-destructive path, Martin says that the Mydans appeared to turn their World War II experience into a source of motivation. "They didn't see their

**"WE ACTUALLY FOUND THE MOST CHEERFUL AND OPTIMISTIC PEOPLE LIVED SHORTER LIVES."**

stress as meaningless—it seemed to fuel them," she says. "And this ability to think about the hard things we go through as ultimately beneficial seems to be important."

Eat right, exercise, avoid stress... These vague directives are often framed as the necessary ingredients for a long and healthy life. There is definitely some truth to each of them. But those who have studied longevity say these are oversimplifications that tend to

80 JUNE 2021

prioritize action over attitude. While day-to-day habits and behaviors matter, a person's approach to life—including, and maybe especially, the way he or she reacts to hardship—is arguably the more important side of the longevity coin.

Confronted by difficult times, a lot of people start drinking, smoking, abandoning exercise, cutting ties with friends, or making other unhealthy choices. These new habits can be hard to kick once the problematic period has passed. However, certain qualities seem to safeguard some people from such pitfalls. Experts say one quality consistently tops the list. "In terms of personality characteristics, the

strongest predictor of a long life was being high on conscientiousness," says Martin.

*Conscientiousness* refers to someone who is organized, prudent, and persistent in their pursuits. "Conscientious people are planful and responsible, not impulsive," she says. "When they take on a task, they don't give up easily."

This may come as a surprise to those who assume carefree, take-it-easy types are best insulated against life's many injuries and injustices. "We actually found the most cheerful and optimistic people lived shorter lives," Martin says. "Being worried or anxious all the time is a problem,

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READER'S DIGEST

but a little worrying—when you're thinking ahead and working through scenarios—can help you to be better prepared." Conscientious worriers tend to put their fretting to good use: They make choices or changes in response to their concerns. Their worrying is productive, not pointless.

While conscientious people are not totally risk-averse, they're judicious about the risks they're willing to take.

These are folks who tend to wear their seat belts, eschew heavy drinking or drugs, and avoid other sources of undue risk. Conscientious people also tend to adopt and stick with healthy habits, and their awareness and diligence tend to lead them into

healthy relationships and jobs. All of these tendencies promote a long and healthy life.

Peter Martin, PhD, a professor of gerontology at Iowa State University, makes it clear that "anyone who has lived to 100 has faced many difficult situations." He echoes many of the above sentiments and mentions a few other characteristics that the long-lived seem to share. "They're not uptight or neurotic," he says. While not blasé about life's challenges, people who live a long time usually don't catastrophize—that is, they don't assume the worst, which is a habit that can lead a person to make choices that get him or her into trouble, such

82

The Mind

as prematurely abandoning a healthy routine or a promising enterprise.

Additionally, he says, those who live a long time also tend not to engage in "upward comparisons." They don't

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spend a lot of time comparing themselves or their circumstances to those who are more fortunate. Instead, they think about people who have it worse or about past situations they

endured that were even more difficult.

Another underappreciated element of longevity is something Peter Martin refers to as gerotranscendence, which, roughly, is a preference for a cosmic or spiritual worldview rather than a materialistic or strictly rational one. He says many long-lived individuals seem to lean toward the spiritual as they age. "You see a pronounced reliance on religious beliefs—on putting faith in a higher power's hands," he says.

Adopting a more spiritual attitude may allow people to better work through the aspects of life that they find inscrutable or disconcerting. "When you're able to hand things over to a higher being, that's a way of

83

Hard times can set off all sorts of bad choices: drinking, smoking, cutting ties with loved ones. These decisions and their consequences often far outlive the trials that spawned them—a drinking habit escalates or lost friends are never replaced. But there's good

news: "It is certainly possible to change your personality, and it happens pretty quickly," says Gary Small, MD, former director of the University of California, Los Angeles, Longevity Center. Here are four things that conscientious people do automatically but others can

teach themselves to do.

**1**  
**Look for a Mentor**

"Spend time with friends and colleagues who are diligent and organized and who have other admirable qualities," says Leslie Martin, PhD, a professor of psychology at

California's La Sierra University. "Associating with people who demonstrate these behaviors can make habit-forming easier, as their tendencies influence us."

**2**  
**Find a Purpose**  
"Increasing one's maturity"

over the years is essential to maintaining good health, says Howard Friedman, PhD, coauthor of *The Longevity Project*. By this he means engaging in "meaningful work—work with a purpose—and doing good things for family, friends, and society."

**3**  
**Form Deep Relationships**

Don't worry if you don't have a boatload of friends: When it comes to bonding with others, it's quality over quantity. "If you are an introvert with a few close relationships with supportive, healthy ties,

then that can be as good as being an extrovert with many more ties," says Friedman.

**4**  
**Stick to It**

Trying all the above is easy; staying with it, not so much. This is why Dr. Small says the core element of conscientious-

ness is sticking with a healthy change or ambition once you've started it. The more people push themselves to follow through on their goals—be they easy to achieve or difficult—the more they can build up their "tenacity" muscles or stick-to-itiveness.

letting go," he says. At a certain point, letting go can reduce anger, frustration, and other emotions that push people toward unhealthy thoughts or actions.

**Valter Longo, PhD**, is director of the Longevity Institute at the University of Southern California. In 2019, Longo traveled around Italy to speak with centenarians in an effort to uncover patterns that might explain their enviable longevity.

He says that two themes emerged. One was genetic good fortune. "They'd say, 'My sister made it to 94, my brother to 98.' So genes played a big part in it," he says. "The other story was the person who did not have any long-lived siblings or parents but was

in a concentration camp during World War II." In other words, something about living through incredible hardship seemed to bestow longevity on certain survivors. Longo has a couple of theories about what that something could be.

His first is based in nutrition science. Much of his work—in mice and in people—has found that periods of fasting or caloric restriction can help clear away dead or dysfunctional cells in ways that may discourage the development of disease and also promote longevity. "If we give mice low levels of protein or calories for a while, then we feed them normally, they live longer than the mice we fed normally the whole time," he says.

While malnourishment is an

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### The Mind READER'S DIGEST

extreme and inhumane example of forced deprivation, Longo points out that many places in the world where people tend to live into very old age are also places where people eat a vegetable-centric and meat-restricted diet. Along with clearing away dead or diseased cells, "eating this way could cause epigenetic changes that affect life span," he says, referring to diet-induced alterations in the way some genes are expressed.

His second theory is more of an observation. "One thing all these centenarians had in common is that they all wanted to live—they wanted to go on," he says. "They didn't say, 'I'm ready to die' or 'I don't care anymore.' They were still interested in life and paying attention to everything." While most people are passionate and engaged when they're young, a great many lose these attributes as life wears on. And this loss seems to matter.

Returning to the story of Philip, the heavy-drinking World War II vet who died young of a heart attack, Leslie Martin's book says that he found his job merely "tolerable" and that he was looking forward to retirement—though he didn't know how he would fill his time or whether he would enjoy himself. Even in his early 60s, he

didn't seem to be involved in activities that gave his life passion or purpose.

Though some, like Philip, regard tough times as a sign that life is unfair or unpleasant, others emerge from a struggle with a greater sense of gratitude and a newfound resolve to commit their time and efforts to things that matter—to close friendships, to family bonds, or to hobbies or work for which they feel passionate. Despite their two years in captivity, Carl and Shelley Smith Mydans gladly returned to Japan when Carl was tasked with leading Time-Life's Tokyo bureau, and the two continued to be engaged, writing and photographing until the end.

While everyone is entitled to a period of adjustment during difficult times, those who endure will not let those difficulties knock their lives or attitudes off course for good.

"If you dwell on the negative, you're not going to do well," warns Gary Small, MD, former director of the University of California, Los Angeles, Longevity Center. "But if you can see a challenge as something to rise to, it can be very gratifying to get to the other side." ■

85