

More Than Age Podcast

Host: Anne VanVlack

Anne

Joining us today is **Susan Underhill**. Susan's professional career has focused on positive aging and systems that support older adults.

Can you tell us a bit about your career and what drew you to focus on positive aging?

Susan

So, I began as a researcher. I studied, psychology in university, and I was very interested, I was, about, why some people, age really well, and other people seem to... to struggle and decline.

And I had... my own grandparents died quite young, and they were not particularly healthy. My parents were friends with, friends of my grandparents on my mom's side, the Crockers, and they were a real part of my life. They were always around, and Jack Crocker helped my dad do a garden in our backyard, a vegetable garden, and he was out there every morning working in the garden, and he was in his 70s, and he was so healthy and virile, and I just thought, why... he's the exact same age as my grandfather, but my grandfather was never able to do that. So, you know, what... help some people thrive, and other people just survive when they're aging. So that's what I was interested in, and so I started doing research in that area, and since then, I've been doing consulting, and it keeps, coming up for me, looking at older adults and, and... The systems that supports them.

Anne

Has your research brought you any closer to understanding the answer to that question about positive aging?

Susan

Well, I think, yeah, it hasn't changed that much since... since I did it 30 years ago, but it really is about, you know, use it or lose it. So, it's staying connected, and it's staying active, keeping your mind active and your body active, and meaning as well, finding meaning in your life.

Anne

So, was there a particular experience or moment that inspired you to dedicate your work to this area? Or were those were the moments?

Susan

Yeah, that... I think it was really that juxtaposition between, Jack Crocker and my own grandparents, and sort of seeing... seeing that in real time, and just, you know, wondering why.

Anne

So, your current work focuses heavily on the systems that support older adults, things like access to care, community connections, and financial security. How do these structural factors shape someone's ability to age well?

Susan

So, every... project I've worked on. Whenever I have interviewed, older adults. Nobody wants to leave home. Everyone wants to age in place. You know, it's no one's dream to go to an institution at the end of their life.

And, so, access to care and community connections, all those things are really important to Aging in place.

And we've come so far. I remember when my parents moved here, they moved to the County, 30 years ago, and I was a young researcher, and, I was worried about them retiring here. They were only in their 50s at the time, but I knew they were gonna age here, and I was worried about the access to care that they would have.

But the policies have adapted, and they've recognized that people are aging in these different locations and have put money towards them. So, my father actually got diagnosed, in his, early 70s with something called inclusion body myositis which is a deterioration of the muscles. And so he became quite ill, and he had... he was in a wheelchair, and at the end of his life, he needed a lift just to move in bed. And, so it was... it was a lot of care he needed. And it was difficult to find PSWs, but I have to say it... it wasn't harder than other places in Ontario. He received good care here in the County, but more importantly, he had... he had 30... almost 30 years here. He had strong connections. In fact, he told... he said that he lived in the County longer than he had lived anywhere else in his life. So even where... he was born in, near Boston, outside of Boston, and he left home at 18 to go to school.

So, the County was really a place he called home, and he had strong connections here, and that's what, you know, having access to care matters, but so does belonging, and he had that here.

Anne

For sure. So how does financial security factor into that as well?

Susan

Well, I'd say that, you know, CPP and, OAS will give you just enough to survive. It's... our system is really built around an assumption that we're gonna save for our retirement. And so, having financial security is important to be able to access some of the services that we need as we get older. You know, retirement homes, a lot of the services are pay-as-you-go. If you need extra support when you're in a retirement home, you have to pay for that. If you're in long-term care, although it's more public than a retirement home, publicly funded. It's the same thing. If you need, you know, the support that's there will do what they can do for you.

But a lot of families invest in PSWs for their family, so that they can get the support that they need, even when they're in institutions. Or if home care is available, but it's often, if you want better care than... then people do pay for it. So, financial security can help older adults, age in place.

It also gives you the ability to travel or, make connections that you maybe wouldn't otherwise be able to make a lot of people travel together in groups and things like that. So, it certainly gives you a better, quality of life. And our public systems are really, meant to support those people who just can't support themselves.

Anne

So, you're doing national work on preventing financial mistreatment of older adults and power of attorney misuse. What should families and communities know about this issue, and how does financial safety relate to healthy aging?

Susan

So, financial mistreatment, by someone that an older person trusts is actually one of the two most common forms of elder mistreatment. So a lot of people think about scams, and, and, internet scams. But it's actually oftentimes people who you love and trust who can take advantage, and it can be good... it can start with really good intentions. There's a sort of natural codependency that comes with growing older, you know, mom maybe needs a little bit more help at home, and so the son or daughter helps with errands and care, and then mom gives them power of attorney to help manage banking, and things are tough for everyone out there now. Things are getting more expensive, and so the child might take a little bit extra for themselves when they're buying groceries, or... And, what people, I don't think realize is that a power of attorney comes with legal responsibilities. You have to keep records, they have to be separate. And money can only be used for the benefit of the older

adult that you're caring for under that, power of attorney. So, it's... it's quite common. I think people don't often think about that as, they think more about scams and strangers taking advantage? So, education and awareness, I think, is really critical. I spoke to the public guardian on this topic, and they said, you know, a bank account can be drained in a day. So... just being aware and knowing what you're signing over, and making sure that it's clear between you and your child, or whoever you're assigning as your power of attorney, what their responsibilities are.

Anne

Yeah, good information to have. And in Prince Edward County, our seniors community is exceptionally large, about 35% of our population. That kind of education here is particularly pertinent.

So, in rural communities like Prince Edward County, we have some unique strengths and challenges when it comes to aging in place. From what you've seen, what helps older adults thrive in rural settings?

Susan

Well, I think one of the best things about a rural setting are the connections and the opportunity for connections. I think a lot of people have grown up here and have those really deep connections with the community, but we also have to make room for people who have chosen to retire here, and allow them to make those community connections.

And Community Care for Seniors is a great example of where you can make those connections. There are opportunities to connect, to stay active.

And, you know, COVID really hit people hard when, and particularly seniors, a lot of fear, was brought up. The drop in volunteerism still... we still haven't recovered as a nation from the seniors who left volunteerism during that period, and there's a real risk of social isolation. My mom is in her 80s now, and she is more fearful of going out, but she still stays connected. She plays Bridge online twice a week on Zoom, and she goes to church, and she drives another lady who's even older. She drives her to church every week.

And she volunteers at the bake sale, and she's going to a party at the church tonight, a birthday party, someone's gonna pick them up.

The county transit is amazing. Hearing about that at the workshop that you hosted, Anne, was really amazing. My dad used it a lot when he first got sick, but hearing that anyone can call it and get picked up and taken to the County Seniors' Centre is great. So, yeah, just getting out and finding a way to stay connected with the people you care about is really

important. And... Prince Edward County offers lots and lots of opportunities, I think, for people to... stay connected and get connected.

Anne

I love those stories about your mom.

Susan

Yeah. She' doing great, and, you know, it doesn't hurt that both me and my sister, we're all sharing a house now, we all have our separate areas. But, yeah, we're all here, and as I get older, I'm realizing how important family is, and staying connected. It's a big reason why I came here.

Anne

Wonderful. So, what trends or changes in the field of aging are you most excited about?

Susan

I am super excited about assistive technology, so I'm doing a paper right now for the federal government about it, and it's been exciting to learn what's happening for older adults now in that area. It can be, like, simple things, like digital photo frames that can help stimulate memory.

There's new canes now that can help you balance. They sort of adjust to your gait, and... and then there's wearable tech as well that can flag changes in your health before there's a crisis, and alert your doctor. You've probably heard about it for things like diabetes and things like that, but you can monitor vital signs now, you know, through those apps, and well, I was telling my mom about this, and she said, well, you know, the farmers here, ... a lot of them don't even have computers. And I said, well, I don't know. I think most people have a phone. And technology is getting simpler and simpler to use, and these things are built in to what you're gonna be getting. Your doctor's gonna be giving you these tools, not just... you don't have to go out and buy them.

The other thing I'm super excited about is, as scared as we are about AI, it has been just amazing for health research. So... for memory and dementia, memory loss and dementia, they have been doing big data analysis using AI to find patterns in the data, and so there's new and exciting treatment options that are starting to become available. And I think we're on the cusp of really exciting breakthroughs in dementia care and memory loss. So it's, it's really exciting.

Anne

That is exciting, I'd like to know more about that. We'll chat more about that in one of these future podcast sessions.

This has been great. So what do you hope that listeners take away from this conversation about positive aging today?

Susan

I think staying connected, for sure, staying active, and finding meaning as well. Finding your... telling your story, it's never too late to heal from trauma. So... telling your story and making sense of your life can really help you find purpose.

And finding meaning in your life can buffer some of the losses that are inevitable with aging. And so just remembering that we all matter, and it... that doesn't change as we get older. And so I think, that's what I'm hoping people take away, is... just staying connected emotionally, physically, and spiritually, really.

Anne

Is there anything else that you'd like to tell our audience?

Susan

Well, I think just how good it feels to call the County home now. I've been coming here for 30 years. I've been to the Milford Fair, I don't know how many times. My son was part of the Easter parade for years and years. He's 21 now, so not so much. But now I'm part of the community. I'm not just someone's daughter or someone's sister, I'm here now. And so I'm really excited about meeting new folks and making my own community connections here. So, yeah, that's what I'm excited about.

Anne

That's great. Well, welcome, as a permanent resident in Prince Edward County.

We hope that you've enjoyed today's podcast episode of *More Than Age* with our guest, Susan Underhill. Thanks, Susan, I really appreciate your time today.

Susan: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

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