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Generation Us: Need a healthy hobby? Hit the trail

Virginia Peale Mar 30, 2017



A little snow didn't keep dedicated Senior Center hikers from tackling Dark Hollow Falls. Hiker them feel strong at an age when most folks assume they're slowing down.

Edward Lay

Take a hike. And we mean that in the nicest way.

Elisabeth de Maynadier has been hiking since she was a Girl Scout in France. For the past 18 years, she has hiked as a member of the Senior Center. If anything about that last sentence surprises you, you don't know enough about seniors or about the Senior Center. These hikers range in age from young retirees in their early 60s to people in their mid-80s, de Maynadier said, and they are a fit bunch.

Don't let that intimidate you, however, because there is a range there, too. Linda Scandore is an accomplished runner in her mid-60s who discovered the group several years ago while looking for a way to prepare to walk the Camino de Santiago— a thousand-mile pilgrimage in Spain. She appreciated the room for each person's style and pace. Some may not hike as energetically as they once did, she said, but "they know the mountains intimately. Everybody has a great moment, no matter what they bring to the table."

De Maynadier elaborates on that theme. "In nature, we are in unity, not in conflict with the world. There is no pressure or conflict. When you are in the work force, you have to look successful. As retirees, we have nothing to prove; we are very relaxed with each other."

What's kept de Maynadier heading to the mountains all these years?

She cites three major reasons — exercise, nature and people — and notes that each hiker might rank them in a different order. For her, exercise is No. 1.

"You feel strong," she said — and that is no small incentive when society

tends to associate growing older with growing frail.

Studies back her up; if you want to feel better and sleep better, hit the trail. Walking outdoors has been proven again and again to have a positive impact on older adults. Hiking builds leg and core strength and bone density and, like many forms of exercise, can control weight, improve blood pressure and blood sugar levels, and lower the risk of heart disease. It also combats stress and anxiety. Given the alarming rate of chronic disease in the U.S., this is reason enough to don a pair of sturdy walking shoes or hiking boots.

Second on de Maynadier's list of what she enjoys about hiking is being in nature. "It is spiritual and you reload your batteries. Many people like to communicate with nature; it's like a meditation. And those who are not spiritual experience the element of beauty and feel right with the world."

For fellow hiker Ed Lay, who has been with the group since 1998, being in the natural world is his primary motivation. "Actually, I do not hike so much for the physical exercise, but for the mental relaxation, and to photograph the flowers and wildlife."

Research spearheaded by the University of Rochester and published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology in 2010 says that simply being in nature can increase what psychologists call subjective vitality — a positive feeling of aliveness and energy. The effect of feeling more alive is separate from any effects of physical activity or social interaction that might accompany time spent outdoors.

Again, studies on the role nature plays in our feelings of wellbeing reinforce these hikers' innate sense that contact with the great outdoors can improve

quality of life not just for aging populations, but for every population. But, hey, guys like Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Emerson knew that a long time ago.

Rounding out de Maynadier's top-three list of why she hikes is being with people. She's familiar with research citing the importance of peer reinforcement and social connections for good health.

Lay added, "It's like an extended community. Once a year, we go elsewhere as a group to hike for a couple of days — Lexington, Mount Rogers, the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania and, this year, the Smoky Mountains." Chatting on the trail, socializing over lunch and spending time traveling to trails near and far provide opportunities to engage with others.

This is true of hiking groups across the country. In California, the charitable organization Bay Area Older Adults partners with two public entities to offer Healthy Hikes, a program of 3- to 4-mile hikes for adults age 50 and older. In an interview last year in the San Jose Mercury News, group founder Anne Ferguson said that building new social relationships "is overwhelmingly the most important aspect of the hikes to the seniors who participate."

At the Senior Center, volunteers plan and lead the hikes. Groups leave from the parking lot at 9 a.m. on Monday and Wednesday mornings (earlier on Wednesdays during the summer months) and usually return by 4 p.m. Hikers can carpool from the Senior Center or arrange with the hike leader to meet the group at the trailhead or a convenient waypoint. The Monday group hikes roughly 6 miles on trails with an elevation change between 1,200 and 2,500 feet. Wednesday hikes are longer, in the 8- to 10-mile range, with changes in elevation up to 3,000 feet.

If you are interested in joining, check the hiking group pages on the Senior Center's website (seniorcenterinc.org). There you will find contact information, the trip schedule and a list of appropriate gear. Pertinent information, including location, distance, elevation and parking, is in each hike description. There are about 80 people on the group's email roster, but a very big group for a hike would be the 12 to 14 people who went 6 miles on a recent Monday. If you are interested in leading hikes, De Maynadier said there is a need for leaders for 3- to 4-mile hikes with less climb.

To quote from the website, "We encourage a spirit of camaraderie and welcome new hikers, but bear in mind that rambling about the Blue Ridge can be a rigorous enterprise." If improved physical fitness is in order before you tackle a group hike, there are many local trails to get started. The Saunders-Monticello Trail, Ivy Creek Natural Area, Riverview Trail and John Warner Parkway are just a few. There are also walking groups at the Senior Center that provide a great point of entry.

Whether your hike is 3 miles or 10, on flat ground or up a mountain, hiking is an activity that encourages physical and psychological health — and you can do it at almost any age. Need some inspiration? There are more than 500 miles of trail in the Shenandoah National Park, and Lay said that there are members of the group who have hiked every single one of them. So go hit the trail.

Virginia Peale is the marketing and communications director at The Senior Center.