

**“Successful aging through the eyes of Alaska Native Elders”
What it means to be an Elder in Bristol Bay, AK**

Jordan Lewis, Ph.D., MSW

Abstract:

Alaska Natives view aging from a holistic perspective, which is not an approach that is typical of the existing successful aging literature. There is very little literature on Alaska Native (AN) Elders and how they subjectively define a successful older age. The lack of a culturally specific definition often results in the use of a generic definition that portrays AN Elders as aging less successfully than their White or non-Native counterparts. However, there is very little understanding of the diverse array of successful aging experiences. This research explores the concept of successful aging from an Alaska Native perspective, or what it means to age well in Alaska Native communities.

Research question:

How do Alaska Natives subjectively define successful aging?

Methods:

Qualitative, in-depth, interviews were conducted with 26 Elders in six participating communities to explore the concept of successful aging and the role of their community in the aging process. Focus groups and feedback groups were conducted in specific communities to present the findings and receive feedback; this ensured the findings and report would be reflective of the unique perspectives of the communities and the region. An Explanatory Model (EM) approach was used and adapted to gain a sense of the beliefs about aging from Alaska Natives. Rather than focusing on pathology, the EM was adapted to focus on the health and well-being of AN Elders.

Findings

This study highlights the four (4) elements of successful aging, or “Eldership,” which include: emotional, spiritual, community engagement, and physical health. One of the aspects of successful aging that is seen in these four elements is optimism, or having a positive outlook on life. This positive, or healthy, mental well-being enables Elders to remain active, care for their families, and participate in community activities. These four elements serve as the foundation of how communities define who is an Elder and what is important when considering who has aged successfully or not. Research findings also indicate that aging successfully is based on local understandings about personal responsibility and making the conscious decision to live a clean and healthy life. The findings also indicate that poor aging is often characterized by a lack of personal responsibility, or not being active, not being able to handle alcohol, and giving up on oneself. Most Elders stated that Elder status is not determined by reaching a certain age (e.g., 65), but instead is designated when an individual has demonstrated wisdom because of the experiences he or she has gained throughout life and their willingness to pass that knowledge on. This research seeks to inform future studies on rural aging that prioritizes the perspectives of AN Elders to impact positively on the delivery of health care services and programs in rural Alaska.

Alaska Native Model of Successful Aging

-Elements of Eldership-

