

The Fit Generation

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › "The Fit Generation" is an award-winning documentary that explores the lives of active older adults in Canada, particularly those in their 70s and 80s
- › Despite facing significant health challenges and loss of loved ones, those featured in the film continue to engage in physically challenging activities and lead vibrant lives
- › "The Fit Generation" emphasizes that age is not a barrier to fitness and may inspire you to pursue an active lifestyle and find joy in your life
- › From an 82-year-old ski instructor to a sports-car driving yoga teacher in her 70s, each participant in the film displays optimism, joy and a genuine excitement for life
- › Joy and health share a deep and intricate connection, and those in the film enjoy both; they don't dwell on hardships or loss, instead choosing to focus on the good around them

"The Fit Generation" is an award-winning documentary that explores the lives of active older adults in Canada, particularly those in their 70s and 80s. Directed by Elton Hubner and produced by Eyes Multimedia, the film challenges conventional views on aging and highlights the advantages of maintaining a healthy, active lifestyle well into your later years.

In the video above, you'll hear inspiring stories of seniors who, despite facing significant health challenges such as cancer, arthritis and heart conditions, continue to engage in physically challenging activities and lead vibrant lives.¹

“The Fit Generation” emphasizes that age is not a barrier to fitness and may inspire you to pursue an active lifestyle and find joy in your life. Further, the documentary demonstrates how making bold choices that bring you joy significantly enhances both your mental well-being and physical health.

Fit Seniors Prove Age Is Just a Number

Imagine being a full-time ski instructor at 82 years old. This is just a day in the life of George Tjelios-Nicholas, one of the active people featured in the film. When it’s not winter, you can find Tjelios-Nicholas biking around Whistler or paddleboarding.²

“George Tjelios-Nicholas is one of the main characters of the documentary and, well, such a character! He used to smoke, has undergone several surgeries and still suffers from constant back pain – all good reasons to stay home and wait for time to pass,” according to Eyes Multimedia.³ Yet, this doesn’t cross Tjelios-Nicholas’ mind:⁴

“Teaching skiing is so rewarding! That's why I like the ski school. I like people, and my job is to get them comfortable. It's a great motivation to keep going ... I find it hard to believe, but technically my skiing is still getting better. I've had people say to me, 'Oh, you're too old to do that.' I'm not crazy, I don't go off big jumps and stuff like that, but I ski pretty fast.

I've had stitches in my head from skis hitting me on the head, I've dislocated a shoulder and I've had two tibial osteotomies because my knees were worn out from skiing ... And then I've had two knee replacements. I had prostate cancer too and I overcame that. I have a lot of back pain, I have arthritis and I'm still functioning, but I believe that the more active I stay, the less effect it's going to have on me.”

Others featured in the film include Lawrence Huzar, who, at 79 years old, played hockey three times a week and keeps busy the rest of the time by building and repairing things in his backyard – a perfect pastime for this retired mechanical engineer. “I’ve never been

sick in my life. I don't even have a doctor," he says.⁵ While Huzar lives alone since his wife passed away, he's not lonely.

He says he's content being alone and also enjoys spending time with other hockey players on his team – several of whom are similar ages. Gwen McFarlan is another inspirational athlete featured in the film. At 81 years old, the world record marathon runner, retired teacher and cancer survivor continued to compete in races, despite injuries:⁶

"There's lots of people out there who will help you and there are certainly lots of running groups that you can join, so if you want to get out there and do something, you can, but you have to want to, because no one can push you into doing anything ... My breast cancer made me very, very positive.

Every day I wake up now I'm thankful because when you have something like that happen to you and you don't know if you're going to come out of it, you're just so glad to be alive and just face whatever today is and forget it and start a new day tomorrow. I'm looking at 100, at least 100, and I want to run as much as I can until then. I know I will slow down, I know that, but I'm not going to stop."

Optimism, Joy and Social Connections Are Common Threads

While each of the people featured in the film have different interests and life stories, you'll notice several common threads, including optimism, joy and a genuine excitement for life. They each have strong social connections in their communities and engage in each day with a sense of purpose, while living fully in the present moment.

Despite facing health challenges, loss of loved ones and other setbacks, each person in the film leads a vibrant life filled with joy and passion. This joy is deeply connected to their physical activities and the strong sense of community they build through shared experiences and social interactions.

Ava Stone, a yoga instructor in her 70s, says, "To me, it's the biggest pleasure to put myself in a place where I can give something to others." She uses class time to teach

not only breathing and stretching techniques but also meditate, share stories and tell jokes. Outside of class, she loves to drive her black sports car around town and encourages others to have fun and create their own joy:⁷

"Now stress comes from not appreciating what is, not appreciating life, your life that you created. We blame stress outside ourselves as if it's caused by some mysterious others. In a nutshell, do you know what stress is? This present moment that you're having, you don't like it. You want to get rid of something you don't want or you want something you don't have.

Then you tell your friends, listen, I had such a stress, you cannot believe it, what the husband and the kids did. Oh, at work ... And yet, you keep creating it ... Resisting life as it shows up to you is your stress. This awareness has brought me so much joy and it came from yoga, and if you have any smartness you know that the mind will help keep you healthy. Open your eyes, become aware of the world.

This world here is absolutely amazing, isn't it? The other joy is that these people that have been coming to see me all these years, they get it, and they keep coming back and they want me to talk and want to have fun and crazy stuff. So, these people are alert, enjoying life and socializing.

... Only the people who have goals, who have plans, who have joy, they want their body well to take them around. Keeping the body lubricated and moving to build the strength, to keep the muscles going and the digestion and sleeping well, that's just to keep you healthy so your communication with life can go on. You have the peacefulness, you have joyfulness.

From this joy and peacefulness, you've come to pure knowledge to say if I'm unhappy, I'm creating it, totally. The ego is something you create from day one, needing to be important and being right. When you let that go, it doesn't matter. And then you become peaceful, but you have to practice, feel it, pass it on, and you can only have fun if you don't think seriously. If people think everything is so serious, where is the fun?"

Optimizing Mitochondrial Function Facilitates Life Choices That Bring Joy

At a foundational level, joy comes from curiosity and the ability to make choices in your life. But if you don't have enough cellular energy, you can't think properly, let alone have enough energy left over to navigate positive life choices. This is why improving your mitochondrial energy production can bring you joy.

Your brain, being the most energy-dependent organ, makes up only about 2% of your bodyweight yet consumes 20% of the energy used by your entire body.⁸ Therefore, a surplus of cellular energy creation is necessary to have the ability to allow your brain to work optimally.

Avoiding dietary pitfalls like excess **linoleic acid**, in the form of vegetable and seed oils, is instrumental in optimizing mitochondrial function and realizing your full capacity to experience joy. Factors like **estrogen** and endotoxins can also deplete your cellular energy.

However, engaging in regular physical activity is also a powerful way to enhance mitochondrial health, contributing to improved energy metabolism. Exercise encourages the creation of new mitochondria and helps the existing ones work better, producing more energy more efficiently.

Keep in mind that once you get into your mid-40s and 50s – and certainly into your 70s and 80s – exercise should be fun and stress-reducing, not competitive. In his analysis, Dr. James O'Keefe, a cardiologist with the Mid-America Heart Institute at St. Louis Hospital in Kansas City, stresses the importance of “social exercise” over solo exercise: playing a game of hockey with friends, for example.

O'Keefe and colleagues published a study in 2018 that looked at long-term granular data on physical activity and longevity.⁹ It turned out playing tennis added 9.5 years of extra life expectancy, badminton 6.2 and soccer 4.7, compared to 3.2 years for jogging and 1.5 years for health club activities like weight lifting and running on a treadmill.

At first, O’Keefe thought the analysis had somehow gone wrong. But then he realized it was the social aspects of the sports that conferred the added benefits.

“Exercising and making social connections at the same time, that is an absolute goldmine of a longevity activity. That means that even walking with your dog or your friend or [playing] pickleball is huge ... The whole thing is to move your body in a fun, playful manner and make it social.”

Joy and Health Go Hand in Hand

This combination of fun, social physical activity is clearly evident in “The Fit Generation.” Further, the concept of “vorfreude,” or **anticipatory joy**, also significantly improves happiness and well-being by allowing you to savor the anticipation of future pleasures. This is a concept those featured in the film also seem to fully embrace, by engaging in daily activities they enjoy and look forward to each day.

Joy and health share a deep and intricate connection, and those in the film enjoy both. They don’t dwell on hardships or loss, instead choosing to focus on the good around them. This ability to recognize and alter negative thought patterns is another key to foster a more joyful mindset.

Instead of catastrophizing and focusing on the negative, shift your perspective to appreciate small joys and social opportunities. Ultimately, as Stone put it, you can **build the life you want**, and it’s never too late to turn a new leaf:¹⁰

“If people are older and lonely, there’s lots of things for old people. They have to talk to a friend, a neighbor, and say what do you do, where do you go, where’s the next community center, what’s on the program? It has to be a habit like brushing your teeth or certain things you do, and then you start enjoying it. There is no joy out in the world, only what you put there.”

Sources and References

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