
Finding Your True Talents

"Knowing what our true strengths are is the key to successful aging," says Helen Kivnick, PhD., associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota. "The trouble is, many of us never think carefully about what these strengths, or talents, really are. They can be disguised by our life settings, such as work, so that an accountant may think her talent is for numbers, when actually she has an additional gift for organization."

Dr. Kivnick's findings are based on interviews, conducted at private residences or nursing homes, with people from ages 65 to 102 who are considered to be "elder role models" by their peers. As an example, the researcher cites one 85-year-old woman whose phone never stopped ringing during their interview. "I complimented her on having such an active support system, and she told me, 'Honey, you can't wait until you're old to start building a community.' Indeed, her strength was based on intimacy and friendship, and she knew that it's easier to keep old friends than to find new ones. But it's never too late to build on your strengths."

To help others understand their often hidden talents, Dr. Kivnick has developed the following self-quiz. These questions will help you to understand your feelings, priorities and, ultimately, your areas of strength:

1. What is it about your life that makes you feel most like yourself?
2. What in your life gives you hope and what gives you security?
3. What parts of your life are most important for you to stay in charge of? What kinds of control are easier to give up?
4. What kinds of things do you enjoy doing? What have you done in your life that makes you the proudest? What do you want to do, most of all, with the rest of your life?
5. What would you like to be working at now if you were able? What kinds of things have you always been good at? What do you wish you could do better?
6. When people describe you, what do they say? What would you like them to say?
7. Who is important to you in your life today? What is it you liked about someone you've loved in your life? Which relationships have brought out the best in you? How do you feel about being alone?
8. Who or what do you especially care about? How do you show your caring? What is there about yourself and your life that you want to make sure people remember?
9. How do you deal with disappointment? How do you experience joy? What strategies have you used for coping with fear?
10. What is it about your life today that is most worth living for? What is an especially meaningful story from your life?