

They've lived 100 years. Here's their advice about everything.

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Centenarians from around the world share advice for a fulfilling life. (Illustration by Chelsea Conrad/The Washington Post; iStock; Photos courtesy of Mark Vickers, the Grewal family, Diara Melite Reid, the Paldo family, the Ruiz family, the Hakoishi family, the Taylor family and the Baker family)

We can learn a lot from people who have lived 100 years. We asked 14 centenarians from around the world to reflect on what it takes to live a healthy and happy life, and to share the advice they would have given to their younger selves.

Here's what they said.

Choose the right life partner

Leonard Samuel 'Sam' Baker, 101

Location: Scottsdale, Ariz.

Leonard Samuel "Sam" Baker, 101, is a World War II veteran who had a nearly four-decade career in government. He's retired, but hasn't stopped working: He writes [children's books](#) and received a patent for a football helmet he developed to reduce concussion risks. But of all the things he's done, he said, one of the best was "marrying Janet." His advice: Choose the right partner and appreciate the time you have.

Baker lives in Scottsdale, Ariz. He met his wife in Sacramento in 1954. Janet was "a perfect soul mate," he said. She was calming and always gave good advice.

Baker served for decades at the federal agency that established and maintained the national coordinate system, a precursor to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. When his career required him to move, Janet moved with him — seven times in the first year of their marriage. She “never complained,” Baker said — even when he had to spend up to seven months at sea, and she and their children had to stay behind.

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— Leonard Samuel “Sam” Baker

Janet died of a heart valve condition at 88. “I was lost for a while” after that, Baker said. “I kept asking myself for a long time, ‘Did I ever tell her enough times how much I loved her?’” It took him years to process his grief. “You have had these 50-some ... years of togetherness, closeness. And suddenly, it’s taken away from you,” he said.

But he realized he was “still whole, and God still had plans for me.” New hobbies and pursuits keep his mind engaged. And, he said, it’s good to have goals. He wants to live to 105 because he wants “to try to solve the water problem in Arizona, and it will take until 105 to do it.” His life feels “full,” though there is always “something missing,” he said. “Janet isn’t here to enjoy it with me.”

Do what you love

Shitsui Hakoishi, 107

Location: Nakagawa, Japan

At 107, Shitsui Hakoishi is determined to claim a Guinness World Record. “The title for oldest barber in the world is currently 108 years old, so I need to work until I’m 109,” she said.

Hakoishi moved from a rural town in Tochigi prefecture to Tokyo at the age of 14 to train as a barber, a male-dominated industry at the time. She received her license at 19 years old, on what she called the “happiest day of my life.” Not long after, she experienced the saddest — when her husband was killed fighting in World War II. She moved back to the countryside of Tochigi prefecture, to the town of Nakagawa, and opened her own barber shop, which she still runs today. She devoted her life to cutting hair.

The key to a long life, Hakoishi said, is a career that fills you with joy. “My job is my passion,” she said. “Every day is a blessing.”

Speaking about her younger self, Hakoishi said: “I’m very proud of her. She worked hard. But I wish I could tell her to eat well and take better care of herself.”

She credits her ongoing health to tea that she makes out of dried Japanese ginger, dayflowers and thistle. She drinks three cups with every meal. In 2021, Hakoishi carried the torch for 1.3 miles as part of the relay for the flame-lighting ceremony at the Tokyo Olympic Games, an accomplishment that fills her with pride.

“I have always told my children: Don’t get angry, don’t hate, don’t envy,” she said. “I have always lived by these words.”

Don’t neglect your education

Queenie Evelyn ‘Robbie’ Hall, 100

Location: Stowmarket, Suffolk, Britain

When Robbie Hall thinks back on her 100 years on Earth, she has one main regret. “I wish I had had a decent education,” Hall, of Stowmarket, England, said. She would tell her younger self: “Get yourself a decent education. And then you can’t go wrong.”

Hall grew up in southeast England during the Great Depression. When Hall turned 14 — then the legal age when children could leave school — her aunt offered to pay for her to attend secretarial college. But Hall would have to pay the bus fare. “I knew how hard-up things were,” she said. Though Hall “loved school,” she left. The chance to earn a living working at a boarding school felt like her best option.

“The only thing I wanted was pocket money,” she recalled. Her mother washed other families’ clothing to feed Hall and her five siblings. After losing his factory job, Hall’s father received government unemployment benefits.

Today, Hall wishes she had made a different choice — and stresses to everyone, but particularly women and girls, the importance of pursuing an education. For her, it’s not just about the crucial skills you learn, but the ease with which educated people can move through society, even when they come from humble upbringings. Hall has passed up other opportunities in her life because “always, at the back of things, I feel my lack of education,” she said. “Study well, study hard.”

Stay true to your principles

Bikram Singh Grewal, 100

Location: Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Bikram Singh Grewal started his career as a government engineer around the time India and Pakistan became independent states, when he was in his early 20s. “Hold your ground in being principled,” was his advice to his three children — even if there are consequences to standing up for what’s right.

“It doesn’t matter how much money or wealth you have accumulated,” said Grewal, in an interview from his home in Chandigarh, India, before he died on Jan. 31 at the age of 100. “The true hallmark of success is performing your professional duties diligently and honestly.”

In his personal life, too, Grewal followed a strict discipline in his diet and exercise routine. He ate five fruits and five vegetables everyday and played golf till the age of 93. “I believe it is a combination of a good diet, exercise and a fixed sleep schedule that can help anyone in reaching the age of 100,” he said.

Learn tolerance

Colin Bell, 102

Location: Sidcup, Greater London

Colin Bell — who was married for 73 years — has learned the importance of patience and a sense of humor in his 102 years. But these virtues didn’t come as easily in his 20s when he and his wife, Kathlyn, had children. “I didn’t understand the importance of kindness and tolerance at that age,” said Bell, who lives in southeast London. “I like to think that I’ve developed it since.”

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He now wishes he could tell that younger self to “be kind” and “more tolerant,” particularly of his two children. Bell said serving in the Royal Air Force during World War II affected him as a father in ways he has come to regret. The military was a “harsh and unyielding” environment, he recalled. Upon leaving active service when the war ended, “I’m afraid I brought that attitude into my home,” he said.

“By the time I became a grandfather ... I had learned tolerance, I had learned kindness,” he said. “My lovely Kath was my tutor because she was an incredibly kind and tolerant woman. ... I think over the years it rubbed off on me.”

Cherish your friendships

Madeline Paldo, 101

Location: River Grove, Ill.

At age 101, Madeline Paldo finds it remarkable that she still has friends. They come over for lunch, including a friend of 60 years, AnnLeola Gervasio. “There’s always action over here,” said Paldo, of River Grove, Ill., a suburb of Chicago. “It’s like a swinging door.”

When Paldo and her husband were raising their two sons, they would meet once a month with six other couples who lived around Chicago. They called the group “Club 14.” The couples would visit each other’s houses to chat; some would play pinochle, a card game. “You could just stop in and visit,” Paldo said. “Everybody had their doors open. They had the pot of coffee on all the time. You could stop by anybody. But today you can’t do that.”

Club 14 got smaller as the group got older. Gervasio and Paldo are the only two from the club who are still alive. Paldo’s husband died in 1991. Her advice: “Enjoy your friends while you have them,” she said. “I’ve lost a few through the years but the ones I’ve got, I cherish.”

Think positive

Pearl Taylor, 103

Location: Dayton, Ohio

Pearl Taylor was 39, with 10- and 13-year-old sons, when her first husband left her. She recalls sitting on her bed, “very upset and depressed,” when she found a forgotten gift from a friend: “[The Game of Life and How to Play It](#),” a guide to spiritual philosophy and positive thinking by Florence Scovel Shinn.

In those days, “people did not divorce. Whatever happened, we would stay with our partner,” said Taylor, from her home in Dayton, Ohio. The philosophy in the book — which, at 103, she still reads from every day — taught her “Everything in our life, our whole life — we create it” and to believe in the importance of self-worth, she said.

“Everything in our life —
we create it.”

— Pearl Taylor

Taylor, who was born in Cuba, and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, moved to the United States in 1947 and was a factory worker at a tire company for 25 years. Last year, Taylor started sharing life lessons on TikTok, with the help of her granddaughter. “The mind is very, very powerful,” Taylor says in a [video](#) that’s been viewed

more than 900,000 times. “Whatever thought you think, good or bad, it’s coming from your mind. And, so, it materializes.”

Learn from your elders

María Ambrocía Ruiz Gutiérrez, 101

Location: Santa Cruz, Guanacaste, Costa Rica

María Ambrocía Ruiz Gutiérrez, 101, grew up on her family's farm in Santa Cruz, in Costa Rica's Guanacaste province, where her parents — and eight siblings — guided her. "My viejitos were very good," Ruiz said, referring to her parents. Her advice: Learn by watching and listening to elders and others who love and support you.

Her father taught her to work the land, help with the vegetable garden, ride horses and tend to the cattle, pigs and chickens. Ruiz remembers her mother as caring and hard-working, making sure the children had nice clothes, which she would sew, and notebooks for school. "When we went out, she would tell us, 'May God be with you, my little children. Behave well, don't hurt anyone so that they don't bother you,'" Ruiz said. "She didn't want us to be spoiled."

Ruiz cleaned people's homes, worked on farms and, until recently, created and sewed dresses for traditional Guanacaste dancers.

Ruiz, who still lives in Santa Cruz, now has her own large family. A single parent to 10 children for most of her life, she's a grandmother of 22, great-grandmother of 24, and great-great-grandmother of six.

Believe in your own potential

Mildred 'Milly' Skjordahl, 110

Location: Tucson

When Milly Skjordahl was young, her father told her that she could do anything he could — as long as she worked hard. Skjordahl, who got her first job at 14, said she always did. But she lacked confidence and passed up opportunities because she didn't think she was "good enough."

Now 110, Skjordahl wishes she could tell her younger self to believe in herself. "I didn't have self-confidence, but I should have had it," she said. "In retrospect, I could have done almost anything."

Skjordahl was born in 1913 in Hammond, Ind., in a poor family. She "couldn't wait" to work, she said. During school holidays, she worked in a grocery store, where she made about 25 cents (less than \$4.50 today) an hour. She gave most of her paycheck to her parents and kept a small amount for pocket money. At 16, Skjordahl graduated high school. "We didn't have the money to go to college," she said. "That was just a dream."

She went on to work at the bicycle maker now known as Schwinn. She rose through the ranks and became one of the highest-paid woman there, she said. Her manager asked about taking on more responsibility. But, she said, she “gave them the impression that I’m happy where I am.” Growing up poor also made her feel like she wasn’t meant for greater things, she said. “I could have been a real career woman,” said Skjordahl, who quit her job to raise her sons. “But I just preferred to stay in the background.”

Now in an independent living community in Tucson, she keeps up with the news, visits friends and paints. Skjordahl’s advice to others: “Don’t be a slacker.”

Keep asking questions

Betty Reid Soskin, 102

Location: Richmond, Calif.

Betty Reid Soskin worked as a clerk for a segregated labor union during World War II. With her first husband, she opened a record store that served the Black community in the Bay Area. She’s been a political activist since the 1960s and served as the oldest ranger in the National Park Service.

But she is reluctant to dispense specific advice, since she learned the most in life by just continuing to ask questions, she said, from her home in Richmond, Calif. “There’s so much to learn. We have a whole lifetime in order to figure out what those things are, and I am still learning, even at 102.” Life is about “asking the questions over and over again,” Soskin said. “And each time you ask them, they deepen.”

Soskin said she became a park ranger at age 85 because she wanted to tell people who visited the park where she worked, Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front National Historic Park, her story as a Black woman who lived through racial segregation during wartime.

“When I was 20, life was ahead of me. When I was 30, I still had life ahead of me,” Soskin said. “And I’m now 102, and life is still ahead of me.”

Be kind

Matilda ‘Mattie’ Clune, 102

Location: Oneonta, N.Y.

Matilda “Mattie” Clune, 102, has raised eight children, spent decades teaching fifth-graders, volunteered in her community and helped care for 17 grandchildren and 19 great-grandchildren. Clune, who lives in Oneonta, N.Y., said no matter how hectic life gets, it’s important to help people and show up for your loved ones. Her advice: “Live your life in a kind way. If you can, help somebody without making a big to-do about it,” she said. “Kindness always comes back to help you.”

When she was in her late 70s, Clune volunteered at the thrift store of a hospice. Then, when her husband was diagnosed with bone cancer, they needed the hospice’s support. He died in 2001, but she continued to volunteer there for 15 years. “It was a very rewarding experience for me,” she said.

Recently, Clune said, a friend said she brings “sunshine” wherever she goes. “I guess that sunshine helps brighten my day, too,” she said.

Never stop reading

Paul Dudley, 100

Location: Bixby, Okla.

Shortly after graduating from high school in 1941, Paul Dudley noticed a different car parked in the family driveway: a 1932 Ford Roadster. He asked his father whom it belonged to. “It could be yours,” his father said. “But on one condition: You have to go to university.” Dudley recalled, “I said no. I had too much I wanted to do.”

Now 100 years old, Dudley, of Bixby, Okla., would tell his younger self not to pass on the chance to further his education. “The fact that I did not go to college is something I regret,” said the World War II veteran and member of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma.

After he served as an aviation mechanic and electrician in the war, his first wife, Dee, pressed him to go to college under the GI Bill of Rights. He felt he had other responsibilities. “I had a family to support,” said Dudley, who has two children. “I had just joined the fire department and was working odd jobs to make ends meet.”

Dudley, who worked at the Tulsa Fire Department for almost 40 years before retiring as deputy fire chief, eventually made it to junior college — as a teacher conducting classes in firefighting administration. He would tell young recruits not to ignore their education: “Spend an hour every day reading. You cannot get enough education. There is always something you can learn.”

Keep moving

Treasure Zimmerman, 103

Location: Coronado, Calif.

Treasure Zimmerman, 103, calls herself “a little” independent. When she was in her early 20s, her mother didn’t want her to marry the man she met in college because it meant she wouldn’t stay in Kansas City. She married him anyway. “Guess how many years it lasted? Only 53,” Zimmerman said with a laugh from her home in Coronado, Calif. “I had a good man.”

That independence has empowered Zimmerman to jump into all sorts of adventures. For her 95th birthday, she drove by herself in her red Jaguar convertible from California to Kansas City. After World War II, when her husband started flying planes as a hobby, Zimmerman learned to fly, too. She ended up flying with a friend on a cross-country all-women’s derby from Bakersfield, Calif., to Atlantic City. They finished 11th out of 60 planes in the Powder Puff Derby.

Staying on the move has helped her live a long life, she said. A former physical education teacher, Zimmerman still walks every day with her dog Gigi, a 12-year-old Havanese. Her advice: “Even when you’re not feeling good, keep walking, keep moving,” she said.

Stay determined

Walter Alfred, 102

Location: Mumbai

Walter Alfred’s dreams were too big to be contained to the small town of his birth in southern India. He relocated to Mumbai at 17, initially living with a relative who helped him get an entry-level non-journalistic job at a news agency.

He taught himself shorthand typing and began to help reporters. His first reporting assignment followed. “I had no mentor. It was sheer hard work and determination,” he told his daughter, Anita Soans, in May.

Alfred then became a foreign correspondent for Press Trust of India, the country’s premier news agency, covering consequential world events including the assassination of Indian independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, and the Vietnam War.

Alfred, of Mumbai, died Sept. 13, 2023, at the age of 102, a week before his birthday. Before he died, he offered this advice: Persevere through adverse circumstances. “I lived this long due to focus and hard work,” he said. “Always resilient, never fearful.”

The Washington Post is continuing to report on centenarians, and we want to know about their experiences. If you are 100 years old or older — or know someone who is — and willing to talk to us, please [get in touch here](#).

About this story

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