

WHITE PAPER

Engagement in Life: The Later Years

2nd Half with Lyngblomsten Enhances Aging Experiences for Participants

By Les Grant, Ph.D.



About the Research

In 2019, Lyngblomsten—a Christian nonprofit organization serving older adults and their families through healthcare, housing, and community-based services—sought to determine whether its community-based services (offered under the name 2nd Half with Lyngblomsten) were having impact on the lives of those who used the programs. The research was conducted by Les Grant, Ph.D., and this white paper outlines the results of the study.

The key finding is that greater participation in 2nd Half with Lyngblomsten enhances the aging experience. This information can be useful to gerontologists, older adult program planners, ministry leaders, lawmakers, and funders.

About the Researcher

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Social gerontologists who study the social psychology of aging have described how the experience of aging throughout history has been influenced by the social context in which each person grows older. How we age as individuals is affected by the social systems that structure our lives. The experience of aging is deeply imbedded in the economic conditions, social norms, political forces and historical trends that shape our daily lives. The social conditions surrounding our day-to-day experiences become even more salient as we grow older. This basic theoretical premise of social gerontology helps us understand why participation in *the 2nd Half with Lyngblomsten life enrichment centers* can have profound influences on how participants in these programs experience growing old.

This white paper describes research showing how greater participation in *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* programs enhances aging experiences among participants. More favorable aging experiences are found in four key areas: 1) **engagement with life**, 2) **social connectedness**, 3) **living well in one's neighborhood**, and 4) **healthy aging**.¹

2nd Half with Lyngblomsten is an innovative, multi-faceted program provided by Lyngblomsten Community Services located in St. Paul, MN. *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* life enrichment centers take an integrative approach to supporting adults aging well in their communities. Programming encompasses arts, lifelong learning, social events, recreational activities, volunteer opportunities, supportive services and resources, spirituality and wellness.² *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* involves community partners and faith-based organizations in the east Metro—specifically, at and around two sites: (1) Como Park (on Lyngblomsten's main campus in St. Paul, and (2) White Bear Lake (at Redeemer Lutheran Church). One attribute of *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* programs that differentiates it from other programs serving seniors is its effectiveness in enhancing life experiences among aging individuals with diverse needs and interests. Participants in this research range in age from 59 to 99 years.

Evolving Theories of Aging

One of the earliest theories of aging is called **disengagement theory**.³ It describes the aging process as "an inevitable, mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others." This theory assumes that disengagement

¹ Leslie A. Grant, Ph.D. *Interim Report: The 2nd Half with Lyngblomsten 2019 Participant Survey*, October 14, 2019. (Unpublished Monograph).

² Please see Lyngblomsten website at www.lyngblomsten.org/2ndHalf for a detailed description of these programs.

³ Cumming E. and Henry W. (1961). *Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement*. New York: Basic Books.

between the aging individual and society is normal for older adults. Withdraw from society and loss of a person's former social roles (e.g., through retirement, diminished health, reduced income, death of significant others, etc.) is seen as being inevitable. Earlier on, the field of gerontology tended to view the aging process as a series of inevitable losses (e.g., in terms of biological, social and psychological functions of the aging individual).

Fortunately, disengagement from life through a series of losses is no longer viewed as a necessary or central component of the aging process—at least not universally. There is tremendous heterogeneity in how people age as individuals and how each of us experiences our own aging. The field of gerontology is moving toward a new paradigm that recognizes the fact that some people can and do age successfully without experiencing significant decrements in biological, social and psychological functions. Among contemporary theorists, continuing **engagement with life** is increasingly viewed as being critical to “successful aging”.⁴

***2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* Supports Successful Aging**

Greater participation in programs offered through ***2nd Half with Lyngblomsten*** is associated with higher levels of **engagement with life**. This research explored 12 aspects of **engagement with life**.¹ Participants who had more participation in (a) *education & arts* and (b) *social activities & outings* programs offered by ***2nd Half with Lyngblomsten*** reported greater **engagement with life** including:

- making life more meaningful
- gaining a sense of fulfillment
- broadening life experiences
- finding opportunities to avoid loneliness
- giving new meaning to life
- having things to look forward to
- finding new ways to stay engaged in life
- finding programs with lots of interesting things to do
- doing things you really enjoy
- meeting people who appreciate you
- staying involved with other people
- finding meaningful life experiences

Maintaining social connections to family and/or friends is a critical factor that supports the well-being of people of all ages including older people. Research by developmental psychologists underscores the importance of maintaining social relationships with others across the entire human life cycle. **Social connectedness** is essential to one's well-being at all stages of life. People who have greater participation in *social activities & outings* programs offered through ***2nd Half with Lyngblomsten*** experience enhanced **social connectedness** in terms of:

- making new friends
- meeting different people
- staying connected to other people

⁴ John W. Rowe, M.D. and Robert L. Kahn, Ph.D. 1998. *Successful Aging*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Most Americans age 50 and older want to remain in their communities and homes as they age.⁵ Unfortunately, successful efforts to create neighborhoods that actually support the needs of seniors to help them age in place are not well-developed nor widely documented in the US. People who have greater participation in *health, wellness & spirituality* programs offered through *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* report enhanced opportunities related to **living well in one's neighborhood**. These participants experience more of the following:

- programs that make your neighborhood a better place to live
- a neighborhood that helps you feel comfortable staying in your current home
- programs with strong neighborhood ties
- a neighborhood that helps you feel safe at home
- programs that reach out to your neighborhood
- programs to help you stay longer in your current neighborhood

Seniors want to stay engaged with life, live healthy lives, and maintain their independence. Health status among *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* program participants was not measured objectively in this research (e.g., using clinical outcome measures). Nonetheless, self-reported or subjective measures of health status have been shown to be predictive of clinical outcomes. This research developed a new measure called **healthy aging**. It is a self-assessment of experiences linked to global health status based on self-reported, subjective criteria. People who have greater participation in *health, wellness & spirituality* programs offered through *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* report enhanced experiences related to **healthy aging**. These participants experienced more programs that helped them to:

- avoid moving away from home
- grow older gracefully
- live as independently as possible

Americans are living longer than ever before. As a nation, we need to create social systems and programs that better support the needs and preferences of older Americans living in the community. *2nd Half with Lyngblomsten* provides one example of how innovative, community-based programs can offer solutions to enhance the lives of older Americans by improving the experience of aging among persons living at home.

⁵ American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). “2018 Home and Community Preferences Survey: A National Survey of Adults Age 18-plus”. Washington, DC: AARP Research (August 2018, Revised July 2019).