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guide to... retirement

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Find a new fit

The routines, goals, and activities associated with our work can increase our wellbeing by contributing to our sense of purpose. Dr Laura Brown (University of Manchester) emphasises the value of replacing roles that might be lost during retirement. 'Our review of the evidence shows that taking on a new role, such as tutoring school children, or helping to maintain local parks, had a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of people going through the retirement transition.'

Tip: Replace lost roles to enhance your sense of meaning or purpose.

2

Get creative

Engagement in arts, cultural and creative activities in retirement can have wide ranging benefits on your health. Dr Daisy Fancourt (University College London) recommends 15 minutes of creative activity each day. 'Amongst adults over the age of 50, research suggests that arts activities, such as painting, knitting or singing, and cultural engagement including going to the theatre, museums and exhibitions, can enhance your wellbeing, lower your chance of experiencing depression, help to slow rates of cognitive decline and even reduce your risk of developing dementia. We also see protective benefits of the arts against developing chronic pain, age-related disability and frailty.' Professor Alan Gow (Heriot Watt University) adds: 'Keep engaged, but in new things you choose to explore. Studies with adults in their 60s and older have suggested taking up novel challenges, such as learning a language, can be beneficial for brain health.'

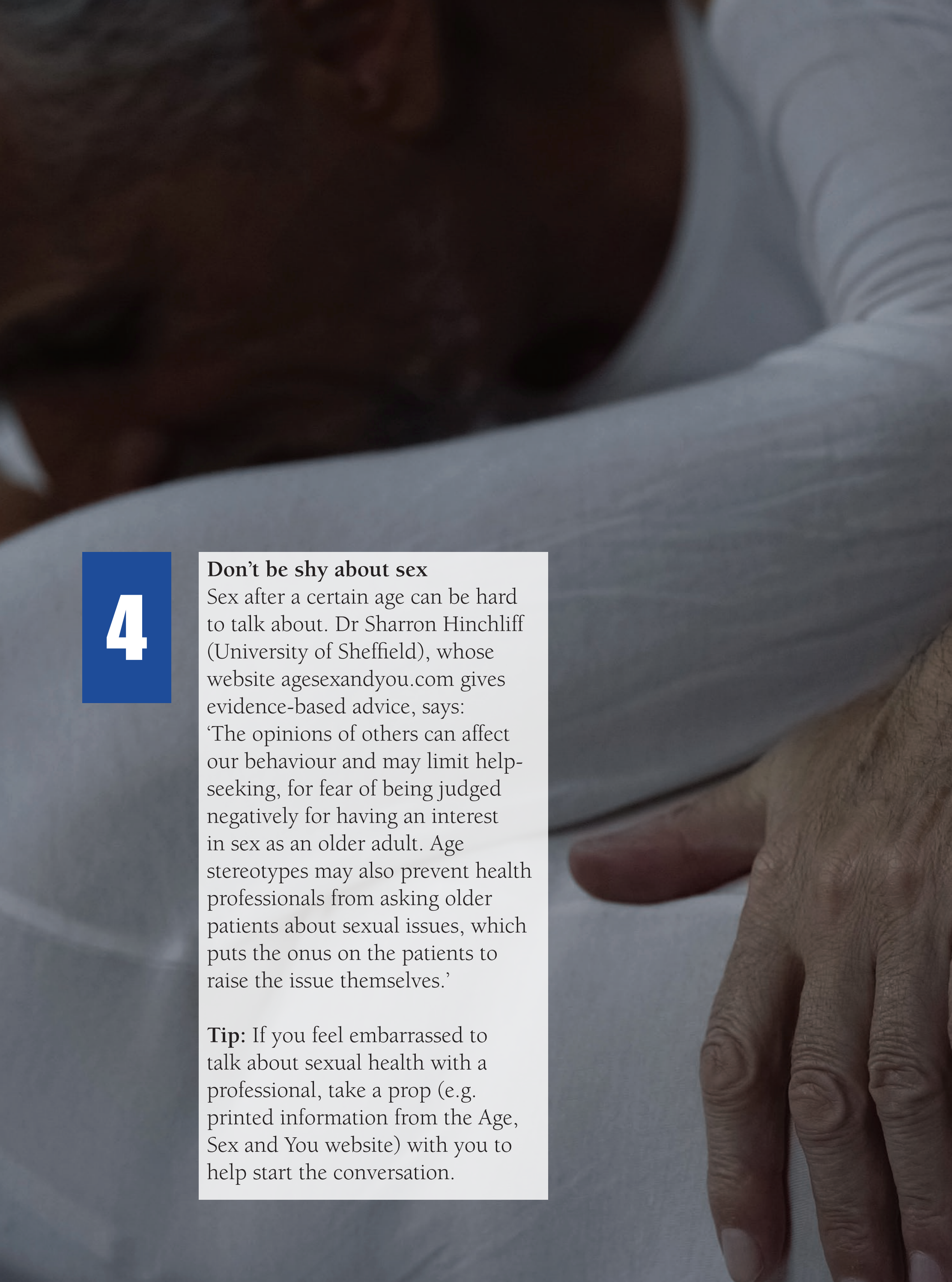
Tip: Set aside 15 minutes each day to do something creative.

3

Go places

'Spending time outdoors is one of the most cost-effective ways to maintain good physical and mental health. Getting out of the house for a walk improves cardiovascular health and muscular strength, but it also promotes mental stimulation, for example through social interactions. Being outdoors also strengthens our sense of bonding to our community, benefiting wellbeing,' says Dr Marica Cassarino (University of Limerick, Ireland). She recommends visiting different types of outdoor places, including both countryside and cities.

Tip: Get out of the house regularly to enjoy fresh air and meet people.



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Don't be shy about sex

Sex after a certain age can be hard to talk about. Dr Sharron Hinchliff (University of Sheffield), whose website agesexandyou.com gives evidence-based advice, says: 'The opinions of others can affect our behaviour and may limit help-seeking, for fear of being judged negatively for having an interest in sex as an older adult. Age stereotypes may also prevent health professionals from asking older patients about sexual issues, which puts the onus on the patients to raise the issue themselves.'

Tip: If you feel embarrassed to talk about sexual health with a professional, take a prop (e.g. printed information from the Age, Sex and You website) with you to help start the conversation.

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Plan for leisure

'Social planning is as important as financial planning,' according to Professor Alex Haslam. Dr Mary Anne Taylor (Clemson University) advises spending some time reflecting on skills, hobbies, and interests that you'd like to revisit or develop, and seeking out local opportunities to connect with others. University or college extension classes, community and senior centres, local groups… all offer the opportunity to explore hobbies, to develop new skills, to travel, and to meet others who share your interests. 'You may even want to check into part-time employment, although many retirees are perfectly happy leaving work in the past.'

Tip: When planning for retirement, incorporate leisure time.

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Use technology for socialising

Poor social relationships are associated with an increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and mortality – they put people at risk in a similar way to smoking, obesity, physical inactivity. Dr Tracy Mitzner (Georgia Institute of Technology) says: 'Retirees can take advantage of social networking sites and video-chat technologies, such as Skype and FaceTime, to interact with children and grandchildren who live in other parts of the country or world. Some of these technologies may not be intuitive to the older user, so they may want to take a class, or enlist a child or grandchild to help them get started.'

Tip: Take advantage of new technologies and platforms to stay socially engaged.

7

Make time for compassion
People sometimes react to physical and psychological changes with self-criticism, frustration, and anger that compounds their negative effects. Professor Mark Leary (Duke University) says: ‘Research on older adults shows that responding to one’s difficulties with self-compassion goes a long way toward reducing the frustration, stress, and depression that often accompany ageing. Older people who practice self-compassion don’t personalise their problems, recognising that whatever challenges they face are shared by virtually everyone at this age. And they treat themselves with understanding, care, and kindness, helping them to maintain a higher quality of life.’

Tip: Be kind to yourself during changing times.

8

Stay flexible
Professor Gina Rossi (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) advocates an open and flexible mindset to better tolerate the demands of older adulthood and to make choices adapted to different challenging situations. ‘Psychological flexibility or the ability to be open and accept present experiences helps us to select the best possible ways of coping with a situation at hand. Being able to recognise the options one has results in higher wellbeing than being inflexible.’

Tip: Keep an open mindset and make flexible choices.

9

Chuck out the clutter
You may decide to downsize, but many people find de-cluttering to be stressful, overwhelming and a barrier to moving. Gail Lincoln (University of Westminster) has researched the topic: 'Your Plan A for retirement may not involve moving house: as one research participant put it, "we all think we will retire, do our gardens and go on holiday with our mates". This optimism bias is why most of us keep things the same in situations of uncertainty. If we're told our decisions are under-optimistic we reappraise them, but tend not to if told we are over-optimistic.'
In short, don't put it off: hope for plan A, but be ready for plan B.

Tip: De-clutter sooner rather than later, in case you need to move unexpectedly.

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Change your view
Retirement and ageing isn't all about loss. Our expertise, factual knowledge, and socio-emotional skills increase steadily throughout the lifespan. Dr Maria Karanika-Murray (Nottingham Trent University) says: 'Both gains and losses are important for successful development and adaptation. Putting things in perspective can help to counteract negative stereotypes, understand how our abilities and capacities compensate for each other, prioritise goals, and plan ahead to make the most of our strengths, needs, and life circumstances.'

Tip: Not everything declines with age… keep things in perspective!

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