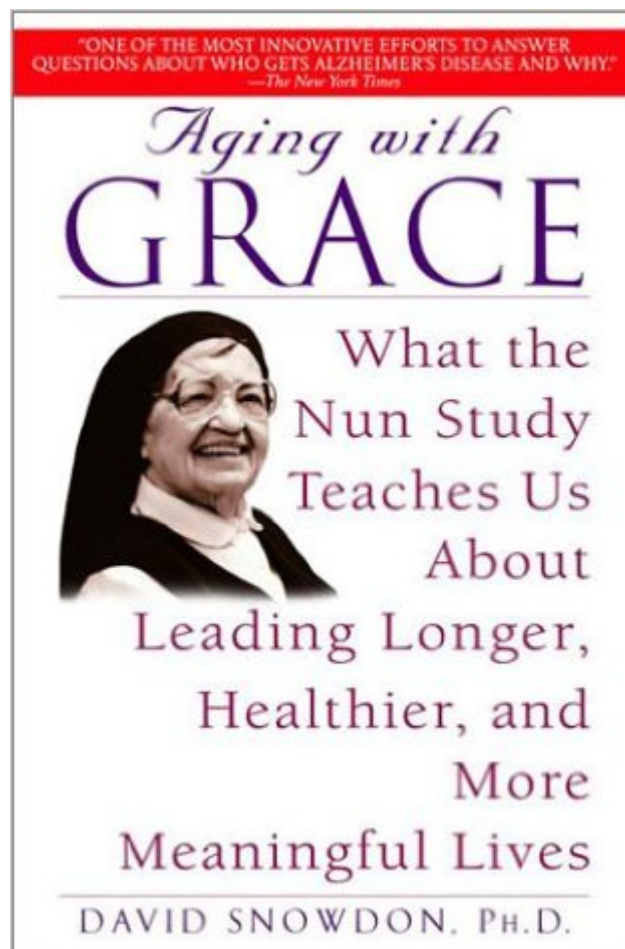


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# Aging With Grace: What The Nun Study Teaches Us About Leading Longer, Healthier, And More Meaningful Lives



## Synopsis

In 1986 Dr. David Snowdon, one of the world's leading experts on Alzheimer's disease, embarked on a revolutionary scientific study that would forever change the way we view aging and ultimately living. Dubbed the "Nun Study" because it involves a unique population of 678 Catholic sisters, this remarkable long-term research project has made headlines worldwide with its provocative discoveries. Yet *Aging with Grace* is more than a groundbreaking health and science book. It is the inspiring human story of these remarkable women ranging in age from 74 to 106 whose dedication to serving others may help all of us live longer and healthier lives. Totally accessible, with fascinating portraits of the nuns and the scientists who study them, *Aging with Grace* also offers a wealth of practical findings:

- Why building linguistic ability in childhood may protect against Alzheimer's
- Which ordinary foods promote longevity and healthy brain function
- Why preventing strokes and depression is key to avoiding Alzheimer's
- What role heredity plays, and why it's never too late to start an exercise program
- How attitude, faith, and community can add years to our lives

A prescription for hope, *Aging with Grace* shows that old age doesn't have to mean an inevitable slide into illness and disability; rather it can be a time of promise and productivity, intellectual and spiritual vigor—a time of true grace.

## Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Bantam; Reprint edition (April 30, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0553380923

ISBN-13: 978-0553380927

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.6 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (107 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #34,301 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) [#8 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Aging > Medical Conditions & Diseases](#) [#9 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Gerontology](#) [#36 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Diseases & Physical Ailments > Nervous System](#)

## Customer Reviews

Well, if we must grow old, and each of us will, we might as well do it with "grace." This book brings to our attention some valid facts based on scientific research which will, indeed, cause us to

contemplate the ageing process. The title of this book caught my eye and brought recollections of my days as a street counsellor. I will forever remember a nun by the name of Sister Gabriella from Spain who had more spunk, energy and zest for life than anyone I have ever known. At 93 years of age, she was a source of inspiration not only to the people of the street, but to anyone who crossed her path. She did not know the meaning of fear, from the days of her youth she remembered more about martial arts than Bruce Lee, she did not look a day over 60, and the only sickness she had ever known was the common cold and a case of chicken pox at the age of six. She proclaimed she did not have time to "get sick;" there was always too much work to be done. If you asked her a question, she had the extraordinary ability to make you look inside yourself for the answer. This book is living proof that there is great mysterious wonder and truth to the ageing process and the monastic life that nuns, like Sister Gabriella, live. She attributed her long life to sunshine, nature, spiritual healing, living with a kind heart, and almost as an afterthought, she added diet and exercise in moderation. Sister Gabriella passed away many years ago in a mission outside of San Francisco in her 104th year. This intriguing book brings many of those same factors to light and reveals that growing old, can also mean a time of renewed energy and vitality, expanded intellectual knowledge, spiritual growth, active participation, and emotional and physical well being. The book is extremely well researched and well written. Regardless of age, there is a lot to be learned here that we can all put to good use in a quest for a long, happy, healthy and fulfilling life.

Most books about science operate mostly from the head. This book also has a heart, and gives you a close human connection with the people being examined. 678 elderly nuns from the order, School Sisters of Notre Dame, are being studied to understand what factors help explain their long life, and ability to remain mentally and physically active at advanced ages. The results of this work will undoubtedly focus future scientific research into the most productive areas for extending and improving the quality of human life. Professor Snowdon is an epidemiologist who has had great success with studying religious communities. Because of the similar environments and habits involved, these communities can more clearly demonstrate the factors that favor or disfavor disease. He has also done work with Seventh Day Adventists and diet, for example. The School Sisters of Notre Dame is a teaching order, and its members are highly educated. For example, of the elderly nuns studied 85 percent held bachelor's degrees and 45 percent master's degrees. This is in sharp contrast with the rarity of these degrees in the general population among women of similar ages. Obviously, they have also led a life of strenuous service to God and to teaching others. The study benefits from many other unique qualities. Each nun also wrote an autobiography

when she was young, and just joining the order. As a result, it is possible to go back and study those writings. The sisters have also generously agreed to donate their brains for research when they die. This means that the physical brains can be compared to the results of cognitive and physical tests to see what the causes of mental and physical dysfunctions might be. Early in the study, Professor Snowden also gained another advantage. He was encouraged to develop a relationship with the sisters, rather than just to study them. The book's many examples reflect his personal connection and observation of their aging experiences. Although the study is continuing, it has already yielded some remarkable insights. In the area of Alzheimer's disease, the research has shown that higher education and better vocabulary and reading comprehension skills when young help prevent or delay the disease. In brains equally ridden with distortions of the disease, functionality of the person varies a lot due to those factors. You are advised to read to your children as a way to help them avoid Alzheimer's disease when they are older. Brains of those with Alzheimer's disease show plaques and tangles. The study suggests that the tangles are important, and the plaques less so. Keeping blood pressure under control to avoid stroke also helps to stave off Alzheimer's disease. Interestingly, more education and greater mental capacity when young are also predictive of longevity. The book also looks at the genetic impacts on Alzheimer's and seems to suggest that these can be overcome to some extent by education and mental development. There are also diet suggestions, like getting plenty of folic acid (found particularly in cooked tomatoes). The stories of the individual nuns will stay with you for a long time. These are very admirable people, and I learned a lot from reading about their lives. If you are like me, you will be saddened to think about the sister who had Alzheimer's who feared that she would forget God. You will also be saddened by the sister who was incorrectly diagnosed as having Alzheimer's and lived four very unpleasant years with this misapprehension. There's good news here if you do live a long time. "The older you get the healthier you've been." So after around 85, many sources of health risk don't seem to get any worse. The stories of active minds and bodies over 100 will inspire you. After you finish reading this book, I suggest that you locate some elderly people (ideally over 90) and get them to tell you about their lives. In that connection, you will also receive much inspiration for the potential you have yet to fulfill, and help make someone's life more meaningful, too. May you become more filled with grace, as you age!

That's what one 92-year old nun said when asked to take part in "The Nun Study," an ongoing effort by author Snowden and others to learn more about how we age and why some folks retain their mental and physical abilities into their nineties and beyond, while others fail much earlier. I picked up

this book because my great-great-aunt, Sister Matthia Gores, is one of the nuns "featured" in it. (She died a couple years back, just shy of her 105th birthday.) I found the science interesting; but the book does not offer a blueprint to growing older without losing mental faculties or growing frail. It turns out the science is giving a more complicated picture of aging than that. But what really appeals to me about this story is the desire of these women to keep growing their minds right up to the ends of their lives. (One nun got a masters in theology when she was 71; one began missionary service in Africa only when she reached her 70s.) It is this faith that we can continue to expand our own human potential while serving God and our fellow humans that makes this book such a delightful read. I don't care if I live to 105, but I hope I can be as brave about seizing opportunities to grow as these wonderful women have been.

I have a family member with Alzheimer's and recently read two popular science books on Alzheimer's disease. I just finished "Aging with Grace" and enjoyed it's compelling humanitarian edge - the stories about the nuns and their interactions with Snowdon are just delightful--one can really envision these people. On the other hand, there is not a lot of information on the causes of Alzheimer's in the book--there's a little on free radicals and some of the Alzheimer genes. For that type information I would recommend an excellent book titled "Decoding Darkness" by Tanzi and Parson -- it provided a very clear presentation of what we know about the causes of Alzheimer's especially the genes involved.

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