

# Insights on “aging in a good way” from Alaska Native Elders across Alaska

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## Study background

- Conceptualizations of successful aging based on Western cultures (Torres, 1999)
- Successful aging has predominantly focused on biomedical models of aging
- Need for more diverse, holistic models of growing older



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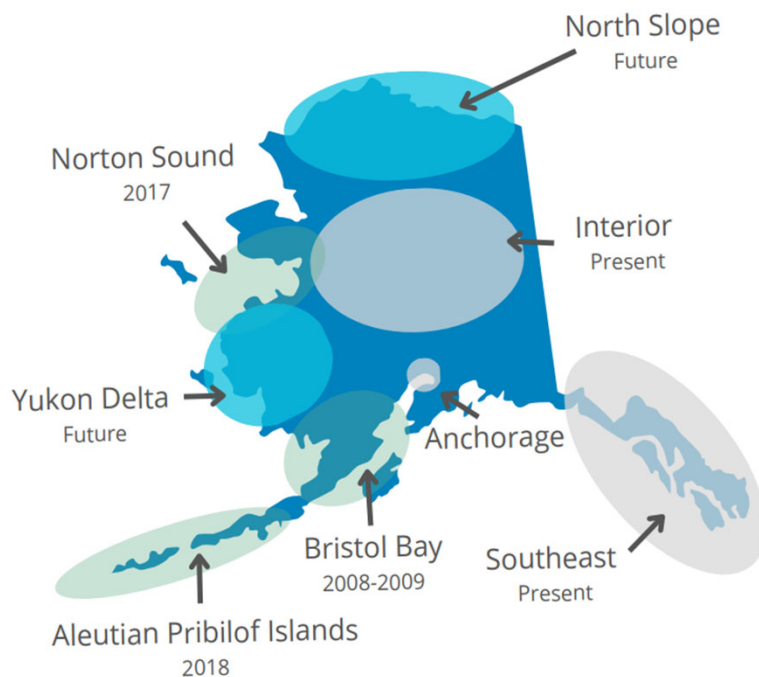
# Research objectives

1. Understand what it means to age successfully from Elders' perspectives
2. Develop a successful aging model that may be generalizable to Alaska Native people



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## Participating regions



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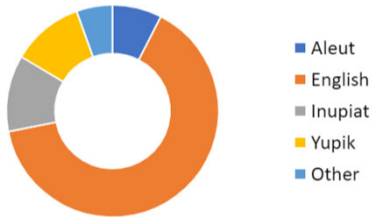
## Successful Aging Study participants

162 qualitative  
interviews

Age range: 46 –  
93 years

Household:  
1 -13 (Average 2.5)

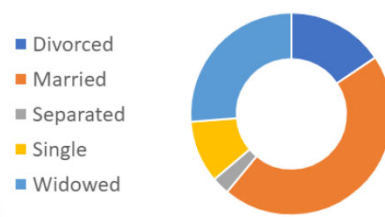
First Language



57  
(40%)

87  
(60%)

Marital Status



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Bristol Bay, 2008-2009

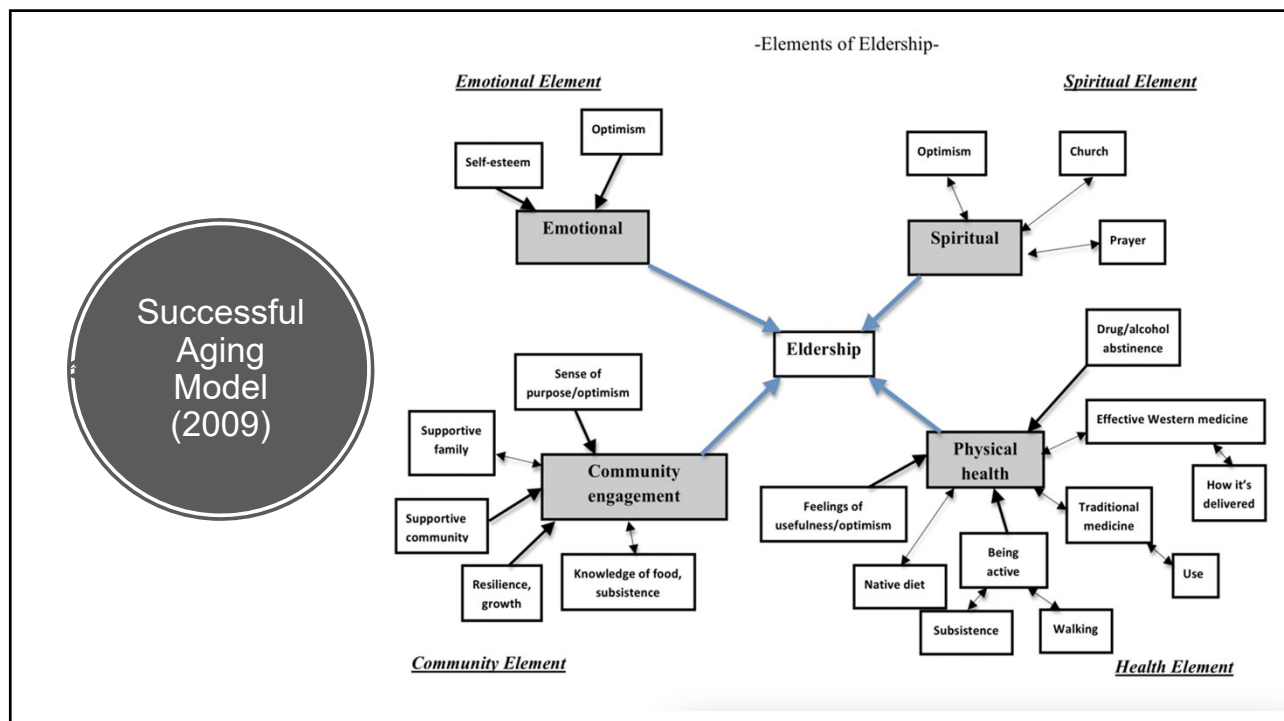
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## Bristol Bay Elders

- **Emotional wellbeing** – “People that are friendly and have a cheerful outlook, seem to age better; view aging as another phase and are not bothered. It is just something that happens.”
- **Spirituality** – “You know that the old people who are religious keep going to church until they can’t make it anymore. The ones I’ve seen were into their 90s, who were still going to church.”
- **Community engagement** – “We get company. Like, when you are sick, they’ll help you. They don’t leave you to be by yourself.”
- **Physical health** – “Well, like I said, being active, getting involved in a lot of things, getting along with the grandkids and the other people. That’s about it.”



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Norton Sound, NW Alaska

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## Norton Sound Elders

Family – “The more the children see us, what we are doing or what we are teaching them through our actions or work, they’re able to see what we do and the more I do things, that’s aging well.”

Emotional wellbeing – “It’s more like I’m knowing that I am helping them. And if they get older, they’ll say, Oh, I remember that.”


Native way of life – “An Elder spoke to me about the beliefs that we have, the meaning of it. So, each different Elder gave me some knowledge that I used in my lifetime. There are guidelines I share with others on how to be Elders.”

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**An Alaska Native Elder is someone who ...**

- Leads community
- Youth look up to
- Takes care of their grandchildren
- Listens to people
- Observes and learns
- Never quits learning
- Takes care of themselves
- Shares what life was like 40 years ago
- Has young people talk to them
- Lives day to day
- Does not think about growing old
- Listens to who they are and
- Treats their mind and body with respect
- Believes in themselves
- Makes wise decisions
- Engages as a leader and mentor
- Helps make the community safe and better place to live
- Understands what life is
- Believes in their children and their children's children

*"Your life journey begins when you're a young child. And we just continue one step forward and one day as a child, when you take your first step forward, one day when you wake up, you'll be taking your first step as an Elder."*



Elder, Shaktoolik,  
March 2018



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An Elder from Shaktoolik  
provided guidance to help us  
better understand the roles of  
Alaska Native Elders

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Aleutian Pribilof Islands (2018)

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## Aging Well in Aleutian Pribilof Islands

- **Community Engagement**
  - Rural community engagement
  - Urban community engagement
- **Emotional Wellbeing**
  - Living environment
  - Community activities
  - Physical health
  - Family
- **Physical health**
  - Stacy active
- **Native Ways of Life**
  - Subsistence
  - Spirituality and religion



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## Words of our Unangan Elders

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- Community engagement – “Growing old healthy, as they said, is that I give you what I was taught when I was brought up. If we hold everything back, we won’t age well, we won’t be healthy.”
  - Physical health – “As long as you’re moving around, you stay young. Do the things you like, and then you stay young because your mind is active.”



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Anchorage

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## Words of our Anchorage Elders

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- Family – “My grandkids keep me very busy, but I like it. I don’t mind doing it with them. I’m happy. At least I get to meet and be with them daily.”
- Community – “No, it’s scattered. Our community here in town is scattered. Here, we’re all strangers, except people who are your relatives from the village or sometimes Native people.”



Bob Hallinen/Anchorage Daily

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## Ninilchik – Components of Aging in a Good Way

- Social Connections
  - Family and Friends
  - Community
  - Spirituality and religion
- Emotional Wellbeing
  - Acceptance
  - Positive outlook
  - Gratitude
  - Resilience
  - Humor
- Physical Health
  - Exercise and diet
- Choice
  - Medicine
  - Substances
- Staying Busy
  - Mentally active
  - Socially active



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## Aging Well in Ninilchik

### Social Connections

*"Don't sit there in the dark and let yourself deteriorate. Reach out to somebody, anybody to get the help that you need for whatever you are going through."*

### Emotional Well-being

*"I stay as positive as I possibly can. Mentally, I just try to look at the bright side of everything."*

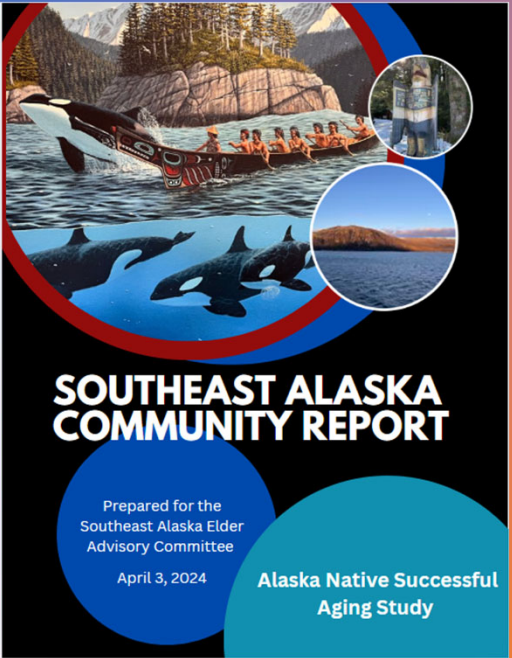
### Physical activity

*"You need to eat well, exercise, socialize, stay involved with all ages."*

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## Southeast Alaska Report

- 35-page report sharing findings
- Co-developed with five Elder Advisory Committee members from Southeast Alaska
- Community presentations scheduled for April 2025

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## Six Components of Aging Well

- Spirituality
- Native ways
- Engagement with community
- Emotional health
- Physical health
- Intergenerational sharing (generativity)

They also shared insight on:

- Benefits and challenges of aging
- Why Elders stay or leave their communities
- Importance of advocacy and passing advocacy on to younger generations



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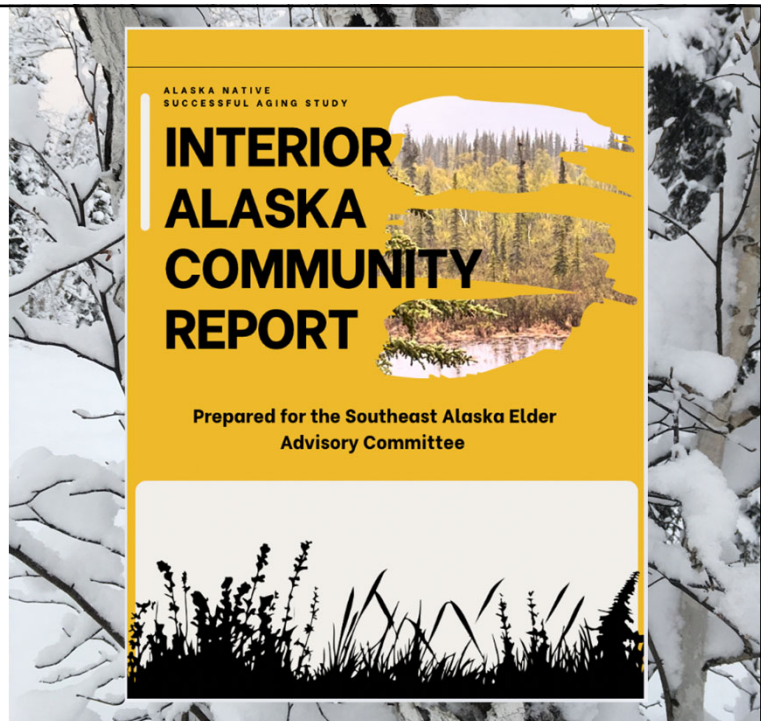
Interior (2022 - 2025)

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## Interior

- Same six components were still relevant for Alaska Native Elders in Interior Alaska
- Additional findings
  - Importance of place and location in supporting physical health
  - Dynamic community support
  - Intergenerational sharing

*"So, as I worked and lived my life in the woods, I'm a hunter, a trapper, and a fisherman so I'm a great advocate. I consider myself as a traditional knowledge specialist because I did all that for so long. So, I am a valuable resource to people that haven't had the chance but need the information."*



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## Other influencers of aging

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Environment

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Humor

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Family and community engagement

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Diet

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Optimism

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Acceptance, self-healing

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History of Elders, generational influences

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Relocation experiences

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Religion, spirituality

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Cultural values, practices

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## Practice Recommendations

- Train and educate health care providers on AI/AN elder health
  - Development of translation services
  - Aware of history of AIAN elders
  - Understand generational differences
  - Development of culturally appropriate standards to be administered system wide

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## Practice Recommendations

- Offer culture-specific activities to engage residents and encourage interactions
- Prepare and share traditional foods
  - Incorporate the use of elders' favorite recipes
- Incorporate traditional dance and music
- Provide opportunities for arts and crafts

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## Practice Recommendations

- Encourage Native organizations, dance groups, events to be held in your facility
- In-service trainings to educate health care workers in cultural diversity, cultural humility, communication strategies
- Network with local Native organizations, University, and school district
- Engage Elders in activities, traditional foods preparation, and determining future programming
- Encourage the involvement of family (of all ages) in Elders' life and facility activities, as much as the Elder feels comfortable

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## Conclusions

- Healthcare providers who work with Elders to understand and promote these activities may increase healthy aging.
- Communication and collaboration between hospitals, clinics, healthcare providers, and the Elders needs to be improved.
- Despite adversity throughout life, Elders teach us how to remain resilient using resources available (family, community)
- One key to successful aging is generative behaviors and acts, and sharing lessons learned to others
  - Teach others of all ages how to age successfully but also heal through sharing

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