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**PREPARING FOR OLD AGE IN  
A GERAGOGIC APPROACH.  
THE CONCEPTUAL ASSUMPTIONS  
FOR GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION  
OF PEOPLE AGED 50+  
"TOWARDS A DIGNIFIED AND  
SUCCESSFUL OLD AGE"**

**ABSTRACT**

**Aim:** The aim of this paper is to present a concept of gerontological education for people aged 50+ *Towards a dignified and successful old age* as part of the preparation for old age in a geragogic approach.

**Methods:** This paper presents a concept for gerontological education of people aged 50+ *Towards a dignified and successful old age* from the geragogic perspective. Geragogists stress that it is important in the age interval under analysis for an individual to take up or to intensify activities preparing them for old age, which such an individual should perceive as a life task. This concept is based theoretically on a holistic model of health, and it also refers to the concept of successful and positive ageing, the theory of education for old age and the theory of psychosocial development.

**Results:** Old age as a phase of human life is regarded in geragogy as a task of an individual. Geragogists stress that the quality of life in old age is a consequence of the quality of life in previous phases of one's life. They assume that lifelong education favours successful ageing and dignified and successful old age. They propose that preparation for old age should start during earlier phases of life and during old age.

**Discussion:** From the geragogic perspective, people aged 50+ should take up or intensify their actions to prepare them for old age. It is important to carry out diverse actions in the physical, mental, social, spiritual and sexual spheres. Gerontological education for people aged 50+ as a form of preparation for old age should be part of lifelong learning because possessing knowledge and skills in this regard contributes to a better quality of life and well-being in medium and late adulthood.

**KEYWORDS:** *geragogy, preparing for old age, education for old age, medium adulthood, late adulthood (old age), ageing*

**ON THE NEED TO PREPARE FOR OLD AGE – INTRODUCTION**

Late adulthood (old age) starts conventionally with the objective rite of passage, i.e. reaching the age of retirement. This phase of human life has been attracting interest from many scientific disciplines. It has been stressed from the biomedical perspective that catabolic processes dominate over anabolic ones, and the effects of body ageing appear (Woynarowska et al., 2021). In a psychological approach, an individual experiences life crises at this stage, the most important of which – in light of Erik Erikson's theory – is associated with reaching the state of integration vs despair (Erikson, 2012). On the other hand, geragogy (pedagogy of old age) perceives old age as an individual's task (Dubas, 2008).

Geragogy is the theory and practice of educational support for elderly people's development, and its main area of interest includes issues related to lifelong learning. Geragogists stress that old age is a consequence of the quality of life in previous phases of one's life. They assume that lifelong education favours successful ageing and dignified and successful old age. They propose that all age groups should be prepared for old age, especially people at the pre-retirement age (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2021).

Preparing for old age has individual and social aspects. A person prepared for old age is satisfied with it because he/she lives with the fullness of life, is fit psychophysically, secure financially (e.g. with an old age pension) and is free from certain duties, like the need to earn their living. Preparing society for old age brings tangible economic benefits – healthy senior citizen is *cheaper* for the healthcare and welfare system. Unfortunately, a majority of adults do not take measures to prepare themselves for old age (Frechman et al., 2022; Solhi, M. et al., 2022; Park et al., 2020).

This paper presents a concept for gerontological education of people aged 50+ *Towards a dignified and successful old age* from the geragogic perspective. This science stresses the need for an individual at this age interval to take and/or intensify measures to prepare himself/herself for old age. The proposed concept uses the assumptions of the holistic health model, as health is regarded as one of the most important conditions of a successful, happy life.

## **PREPARING FOR OLD AGE – A REVIEW OF CONCEPTS OF POLISH GERAGOGISTS**

Preparing for old age in Polish geragogy is taken as educational (education for old age) and non-educational activities. Preparing for old age has been discussed by many geragogists, e.g. Zofia Szarota, who refers to education for old age (Szarota, 2015); Elżbieta Dubas, who refers to education for a beautiful old age and preparing for old age (Dubas, 2008, 2013); Katarzyna Uzar, who analyses education for old age in the aspect of personalism (Uzar, 2011). It is not possible to name and describe all these concepts

in this paper (more in: Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2021), which is why a few were outlined, which were close to the proposed concept.

According to Aleksander Kamiński, education for old age involves supporting people in acquiring the needs, habits and skills which are going to help them find a useful job during the retirement period and enjoy their free time, which will contribute to maintaining their fitness and activity. This education involves informing, encouraging, persuading, instructing and arranging life situations that favour developing proper procedures to be followed at work and in one's leisure, which will be useful during the retirement period. Education for old age can be the job of the family, neighbourhood, work establishment, and associations, but the individual's self-educational activity is the most important. The media should play an instructive role in this regard. Education for old age must start at a young age so that proper habits are fixed, and last till the end of one's life, and the educational activities should be intensified during the pre-retirement period (Kamiński, 1871). Kamiński formulated the gerontological tasks for the periods of one's life, beginning with one's young age and ending with the period of disabled old age. Given the concept under development, one should refer to the recommendations concerning two phases, i.e. 1) young age and adulthood – be accustomed to the rational use of free time, be a consumer of culture, get used to changing a job; 2) the preretirement period (or an old-age allowance) – inspire and develop a self-education activity, allow more time and one's activity for one's free time, develop one's interests, participate in cultural, entertainment and social activities, secure housing for the future, and consider continuing work during the retirement period (type of work and working hours) (Kamiński, 1975).

Many aspects of preparing for old age are dealt with by Agata Chabior, who identified the following areas:

1. biological – these are actions aimed at maintaining physical fitness, i.e. developing a habit of exercising and active leisure;
2. social – these are actions aimed at ensuring dignified existence, access to medical services, maintaining social bonds and social activity;
3. mental – connected with the need to understand and accept old age, decreasing the fear and anxiety of old age, with positive thinking about the future;

4. intellectual and cultural – it is important here to possess the ability to make rational use of one's free time, pursuing one's interests and seeking new ones (Chabior, 2000).

Adam A. Zych refers to gerontological prophylaxis and ageing prophylaxis. He notes that the aim of gerontological prophylaxis is an old age free from diseases and psychophysical disability, delaying the ageing processes, restricting the pathology associated with the processes and maintaining physical, mental and social health as long as possible. This prophylaxis includes health protection (against diseases and their complications), controlling pathogens and ageing accelerating factors (such as little exercise, improper nutrition, overload of the nervous system, sudden change of the environment, loneliness and social isolation, negative attitudes towards senior citizens and old age, no preparation for old age). Gerontological prophylaxis has two main forms:

1. prophylaxis against premature ageing – this is delaying the ageing processes and maintaining physical and mental fitness in early old age as long as possible (i.e. between the ages of 60 and 74);
2. prophylaxis against old-age infirmity – this aims at avoiding helplessness caused by advanced ageing processes and it involves therapeutic and rehabilitation activities in old age (e.g. with respect to individuals with intensified ageing symptoms, with limited mobility and an ability to look after oneself).

The aim of prophylaxis against ageing is to ensure proper ageing in the physical, mental and social aspects, and its aim is to create the conditions for senior citizens to have independent lives on a proper level and to provide help in perceiving themselves positively as ageing and aged individuals. According to Zych, given that ageing is an individual process, it is not possible to cover everyone with prophylaxis against ageing or to apply any administrative obligation in this regard. The most important rules of prophylaxis against ageing include: an active lifestyle, eating rationally, maintaining social contacts, and maintaining an active mental attitude (Zych, 2011).

## **A CONCEPT OF GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE AGED 50+ "TOWARDS A DIGNIFIED AND SUCCESSFUL OLD AGE – GENERAL PRINCIPLES"**

This concept is addressed to individuals aged 50-59 years as that is the time when many biological changes appear, which are a consequence of degenerative (but not disease-like) changes taking place since the age of about 35, which are a consequence of ageing. Women aged 50+ years experience these changes as menopause, while men – as andropause. What is typical of both sexes are changes in the endocrine systems – in consequence, women have less oestrogens, and men have less testosterone (Woynarowska et al., 2021). Meno – and andropausal changes, as well as observation of ageing relatives (e.g. parents), make one ponder over one's old age. This is a good time to encourage people aged 50+ to start preparing for old age.

The concept of gerontological education of people aged 50+ *Towards a dignified and successful old age* is based on caring about one's physical, mental, social, sexual and spiritual health. The aim of this education is to make people aged 50+ aware that they can live as if in the prime of life, that they can experience the fullness of life (well-being) and experience the fullness of humanity if they take diverse actions aimed at preserving their health. It is important that the model of healthy ageing should be combined with a model of active ageing. The health-promoting, active lifestyle reduces the risk of disease and disability and has a positive impact on fitness and well-being (Komatsu et al., 2018; Neville et al., 2021; Frechman et al., 2022). One should also bear in mind that everyone should care about their own health and live a healthy and active life.

The proposed concept of gerontological education for people aged 50+ assumes the need to prepare for old age in the physical, mental, social, spiritual and sexual spheres. These spheres are elements included in the holistic model of health in the individual aspect. This concept is based on the knowledge of medium and late adulthood as development phases, of one's own body, of the specificity of human ageing and also developing health-promoting habits.

## **KNOWLEDGE OF AND DEVELOPING HEALTH-PROMOTING HABITS AS THE BASE FOR GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE 50+ "TOWARDS A DIGNIFIED AND SUCCESSFUL OLD AGE"**

People aged 50+ should take into consideration the statements of the human development theory during their life, namely, that it is possible to acquire knowledge and skills during medium and late adulthood (e.g. self-creation competence) and to develop habits, attitudes and behaviours, i.e. self-improvement and enriching one's personality. Everyone has development potential that they can continuously use and enrich. Development is also a life necessity for adults. Taking actions aimed at self-development contributes to maintaining independence, improvement of one's life situation, gaining personal satisfaction, self-fulfilment, social approval, increase in self-esteem and a sense of life (Straś-Romanowska, 2000), which contributes to successful and positive ageing and reaching successful old age (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2021).

People aged 50+ should be aware that the process of body ageing involves changes in all its systems and organs. With an advanced age, more and more involuntional changes take place, and the pace in which they appear depends on genetic and environmental factors, as well as on an individual's activity (Neville et al., 2021). They should also know that their health and vitality, as well as experiencing the fullness of life and humanity, is favoured by how they perceive their ageing in an aspect of a constantly regenerating organism in harmony with the surrounding environment rather than a constantly decomposing one (Chopra 1995).

The perimenopausal period is the time when such symptoms may appear as obesity, gastric problems, decreased mood, pessimistic thoughts, sadness, hopelessness, distractedness, fatigue, and unwillingness to have sex. These may be the effects of ageing, but they can also be symptoms of neglecting the needs of the body and improper responding or failing to respond to signals sent by the body (e.g. ones that indicate overload). Abusing one's body can result from taking excessive amounts of medicines (which disrupts the body's natural self-healing ability, deprives the body of essential nutrients, and impairs its natural immunity), experiencing continuous pressure from the social

environment (which contributes to intensified stress and to deprivation of one of the joys of life and vitality), lack of resistance to difficult situations, inability to release stress (Lipman, 2016). This is why it is important for people aged 50+ to know whether their body functions properly (which is indicated by the correct body weight, physical fitness, clarity of mind, ability to concentrate, peaceful sleep) or if its function is impaired, e.g. as a result of neglect.

People aged 50+ should have the following habits (which they either acquired in earlier phases of life or should develop as part of self-education):

- proper eating habits;
- a habit of sleeping at the right time and in the right amount;
- a habit of practising various forms of physical and mental exercise, with a proper proportion of each (without overload in any forms and with alternating physical and mental activity);
- a habit of releasing stress (e.g. by taking up activities which give one pleasure);
- pursuing one's interests and passions.

### **THE CONCEPT OF GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION OF PEOPLE AGED 50+ "TOWARDS A DIGNIFIED AND SUCCESSFUL OLD AGE" IN LIGHT OF A HOLISTIC MODEL OF HEALTH – PRACTICAL GUIDANCE**

This concept of gerontological education for people aged 50+ assumes the need to prepare for old age in the physical, mental, social, spiritual and sexual spheres. It is important from the geragogic perspective that adults at this age should possess the proper knowledge and acquire specific skills and habits associated with a given sphere.



## **PHYSICAL SPHERE – CARING ABOUT PHYSICAL HEALTH AND FITNESS**

Physical health is when the biological function of the body is correct, with no disruptions, and when a person is physically fit and healthy and does everyday activities without problems and without being excessively tired (Woynarowska et al., 2021). What fifty-year-olds can and do focus on to maintain or improve their physical health includes:

- physical health status – one should have one's physical health examined regularly, including medical check-ups. The risk of developing cancer, hypertension, atherosclerosis, and diabetes increases with age. Many diseases can be treated or controlled by a properly composed diet and properly selected physical exercise. Some people have a tendency to become overweight. They should reduce the amount of calories consumed and exercise regularly. One should bear in mind that physical effort is a way of releasing stress, and people aged 50+ often experience stressful situations caused by having to look after their relatives (children, sometimes grandchildren or parents).
- health and fitness – regular exercise delays the process of system and organ ageing. Therefore, one should make daily, weekly and monthly plans to include exercise in these periods. It is recommended to exercise for 20 minutes at least three times a week, and preferably every day. It is useful to develop the relevant habits. It is noteworthy that too intensive exercise can cause significant overload, health issues and even death. Therefore, one should avoid excessive exercise and discuss its level and types with a doctor.

## MENTAL SPHERE – LOOKING AFTER ONE’S MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL FITNESS

Mental health is defined as *well-being, a feeling of happiness, psychological resources, owing to which one can develop one’s abilities, cope with stress, work effectively, give others something from oneself*. Mental health consists of two elements:

- mental health – is an ability to think clearly and in a coherent manner, to learn, to use one’s intellectual potential;
- emotional health – is an ability to control one’s emotions, to recognise them and to express them in a manner adequate to the situation, providing a sense of comfort and accepted socially; *an ability to cope with difficulties, stress, tension, depression and anxiety* (Wojnarowska et al., 2021, p. 212).

The main task for people aged 50+, associated with maintaining mental health, is to accept the upcoming old age and changes associated with it, which they can see in themselves, e.g.:

- in the physical dimension – hair turning grey, developing wrinkles, decreasing skin elasticity, gaining body weight, decreased libido, difficulty during sex, decreased muscle strength, poorer stamina, difficulty falling asleep, increased susceptibility to diseases and more difficult recovery (Lipman, 2016);
- in a mental dimension – slowing down the thinking processes, problems with concentration, poorer short-term memory, decrease in fluid intelligence, anxiety, decreased mood, depression;
- in a social dimension – experiencing multiple losses, e.g. because of the ageing of the closest relatives or deaths of some of them, e.g. grandparents, parents. Those who have adult children can experience empty nest syndrome, when the children become independent and leave their family home. The loss of one’s relatives can be an effect of a divorce, which often takes place in couples aged 50+, as a result of a middle-life crisis experienced by one or one’s spouse and/or the closing-door syndrome. If a divorce is not what one expects, it may cause health problems (including depression) and cause suicidal thoughts and attempts.

These changes are often perceived as severe losses. Accepting these losses and related situations helps to maintain emotional balance. However, some cannot reconcile with these changes, and it is necessary to seek professional support from a psychologist, therapist or psychiatrist. It is recommended that individuals aged 50+ should take independent actions aimed at making up for the losses, e.g. by seeking new social contacts or by developing interests and passions, as well as by discovering one's potential.

Positive thinking is extremely important in the mental sphere. Positive psychology, which deals with effective ways of feeling well-being in every phase of life, is very helpful in this regard (Florek, 2023). Even the process of one's body ageing can and should be thought of optimistically, e.g. one should remind oneself that the degenerative processes are accompanied by regeneration of cells and systems.

Individuals aged 50+ should know the assumptions of the concept of positive (Hill, 2009) and successful ageing (more in: Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2021). Both concepts indicate that each of us can influence the quality of our own life during old age. Adults will find multiple guidelines about how to cope with the changes. For example, the need to maintain self-discipline is particularly valuable.

Caring about one's mental fitness is another task associated with the body ageing after the age of 50. It is worth using handbooks and guidebooks that describe how one should look after one's mind. Adults intuitively train their memory and mental processes by solving crossword puzzles, taking part in competitions, and pursuing their interests and passions. This is a very good direction for developing one's activities, which favour the maintaining of one's mental fitness.

## **SOCIAL SPHERE – LOOKING AFTER SOCIAL HEALTH, BUILDING VALUABLE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS**

Social health denotes independence (autonomy), an ability to maintain good interpersonal relations and cooperation with others, and the ability to accept responsibility for oneself. Social health concerns relations between an individual and society, and it takes place when synergy, i.e. social harmony exists. A socially healthy individual enjoys performing specific social roles, feels comfortable in social groups, and experiences reciprocity: others also enjoy being around them (Woynarowska et al., 2021).

In the social sphere, it is important to maintain good relations with others and with oneself. Individuals aged 50+ should be aware that this task is very important for their well-being – both now and in the future, in old age.

In this aspect, it is advisable to be able to find and plan some free time intended only for oneself and to be spent with others. It is also important to plan some time to spend with oneself and to see the potential in it, which can be a form of reconciliation with loneliness and/or preparing for loneliness. Being alone and loneliness are the states one could experience at every stage of one's life. However, the perimenopausal period and old age are often associated with such situations. It is worth using the guidelines developed on the pedagogic grounds on how to cope with being alone and with loneliness. It is important to perceive such states as an opportunity for self-development, perhaps spiritual development – as the time for contemplating individually some transcendental experiences.

For interpersonal relations to be valuable, one should make a suitable effort, i.e. cherish personal relations (with one's parents, grandparents, children, siblings, parents' siblings, etc.), care about friendly, neighbourly relations; maintain beneficial relations with individuals from the present or former workplaces and other acquaintances. Valuable relations with others can also be developed by involving in various forms of social activities (Neville et al., 2021).

## **SEXUAL SPHERE – CARE ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH**

Sexual health is *a set of biological, emotional, intellectual and social aspects of sexual life, important for the positive development of personality, communication and love* (Woynarowska et al., 2021, p. 213). Sexual health is experienced by a person who is free from compulsion and sexual violence. Some problems may appear in adulthood related to sexual life, and they should be reported to specialists to be resolved. Human sexuality is as important a sphere of life as any other. There are changes taking place with age, and one should adapt positively to them, sometimes with the help of doctors, psychologists, or therapists.

## **SPIRITUAL SPHERE – CARE ABOUT ONE’S SPIRITUAL HEALTH**

Spiritual health denotes the *experiencing of inner peace and reconciliation with oneself as well as recognition and implementation of religious or moral rules and beliefs* (Woynarowska et al., 2021, p. 212). If an individual is a believer, their spiritual health is associated with their beliefs, religious practices and values of a specific religion. On the other hand, for a non-believer, it arises from their personal beliefs and principles, from the laws of nature (Woynarowska et al., 2021). Aiming towards spirituality in adult life helps one to maintain a sense of self-agency, which is very important in the face of the inability to maintain full control of the physical ageing of the body.

## CONCLUSIONS

Looking from the geragogic perspective, a person should be preparing for old age throughout their life. Good life quality during old age depends on many factors, mainly on the person's activity – especially on the person's self-educational activity. This concept for gerontological education of people aged 50+, *Towards a dignified and successful old age*, contains many guidelines on how to achieve a dignified and successful old age. The losses experienced with the process of ageing in the biopsychosocial dimension can be compensated for by participation in various forms of activities, in accordance with the slogan promoted in Polish geragogy: *Let's add life to years* to enjoy well-being as long as possible. According to geragogists, educational activity is the most valuable, with e-learning as a helpful tool.

Preparing for old age in people aged 50+ is needed because the ageing process can accelerate in some adults, and they had better acquire the necessary knowledge in time, i.e. before the effects of body ageing or of disease make it difficult for them to absorb such knowledge. The proposed concept of gerontological education for people aged 50+, *Towards a dignified and successful old age*, developed in a geragogic approach, taking into consideration a holistic health model, can help one to prepare for old age effectively. It is worth making its elements part of lifelong learning. It is recommended that people aged 50+ should know and take measures discussed in this paper in the physical, mental, social, sexual, and spiritual spheres because they often determine good quality of life and well-being during medium and late adulthood.

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