

Module 2: Content Materials

1. PSYCHOLOGICAL PARTICULARITIES OF OLDER PEOPLE IN THE LEARNING AND TEACHING PROCESS

Old age through the magnifying glass

Psychology and social psychology research on age and ageism reveals the fact that not necessarily the age, but the views of self and the views of others upon the aging person are linked to cognitive decay and emotional fragility, that discrimination of older people may lead to their potential cognitive decline and increased dependency in their later years, and that most aging people perceive themselves 20% younger than their actual age.

In other words, we get old as we and others perceive us getting old and, as long as we stay motivated, stimulated, and engaged, older age feels more or less just like previous ages: We have the same personal resources as before (or sometimes maybe more), the same competences and abilities, and we may find ways to compensate for whatever physical or psychological changes are brought by the piling years.

Moving away from old (age) stereotypes

From a cognitive point of view, the strong points of old age are:

- There are valuable memories and plenty of information stored over decades that older people have access to (recalling long lived events is often very easy for older people and involving them in sharing/writing their biographies is very stimulating and motivating).
- Based on their experience, older people demonstrate a higher capacity of anticipation.
- All older adults dispose of a good set of skills, which may be partially or totally transferred to new activities (for example, speaking a foreign language may lay the ground for learning another, car driving skills provide good coordination for learning to dance or to use a sewing machine or an electrical saw, etc.).
- Creative thinking and critical thinking are highly functioning in older adults who continue to be intellectually engaged after retirement.
- Most older people demonstrate very good language skills and extended vocabulary, based on prolonged and varied use of the language.
- Sleeping rate often diminishes in old age, which offers older people more time for engaging in various activities.
- Old age does not diminish curiosity or the will to learn and experience new things and, for most older learners, this is accompanied by a good set of planning skills, which allows them to take control of the things they want or need to learn and als of their educational process.

From an emotional point of view, the strong points of old age are:

- Older adults are eager to learn new things as long as they are interested in the topic and perceive its usefulness in their lives; most of the time, they learn for fun or to fulfill an old dream.
- Older people need and enjoy recognition for their work and experience, as any other adult would.
- Older adults are often seeking social connection and they enjoy participating in group activities. Older women are more emotionally dependent on their group than men and they are ready to leave the learning group if they do not feel accepted and respected by the other learners or by the educator.
- Older people feel stimulated by their sense of usefulness: If they feel useful to each other or to the community they are ready to put to good use all their skills and competences. The sense of usefulness may also be triggered by planning activities.
- Old age is often accompanied by a certain detachment of the material world (hence often endowed with a lot of wisdom), which brings with itself more patience and tolerance for the behaviors of others, but also more financial responsibility.
- Older people seek mostly contemplative recreational activities, but they also enjoy participatory activities if their motor skills allow it.
- A certain routine may offer the sense of stability in old age, but monotonous activities are to be avoided, as they are less stimulative compared with those involving diversity and novelty.

2. PSYCHO-SOCIAL CONDITIONS FOR THE CREATION OF AN OPTIMAL LEARNING ATMOSPHERE FOR OLDER PEOPLE

The safe space for learning and growth: What is it and why do we need it?

The term '*safe space*' defines a community, a physical location, or a psychosocial stage of a group of individuals where people with different cultural, social and/or psychological backgrounds can speak freely about their identities and issues that affect their lives.

Creating a safe space for a group involved in activities related to education, training, and personal development is a must as people grow and learn best when they feel safe and move within an atmosphere of tolerance.

Remember:

- Everyone learns better when they feel safe, included, and validated.
- Creating a safe space for a group involved in personal development activities is a must.
- The safe learning environment is co-created by all the participants, including the trainer.
- Creating a safe learning environment can be an on-going process that needs constant monitoring.
- The more people the group contains and the more heterogeneous they are, the more time it takes and the more difficult it may prove to be to create a safe space.

The safe space for learning and growth: How can we create it?

Practical information about how to facilitate the creation of a safe learning environment for older people:

- Establish and promote clear communication rules from the beginning: Consider both general aspects of communication and those specific for the group.
- The facilitator or educator is an expert in their line of work, but the older learners are experts on their learning and development process. Therefore, offer options and make decisions in a democratic way.
- Discuss, agree upon, and maintain confidentiality throughout the group meetings.
- Democratically discuss boundaries and ground rules from the beginning or whenever they seem necessary to be revisited.
- Ensure that the experience is accessible and inclusive, regardless of ability level, economic situation, gender variance, physical integrity, culture, etc.
- Allow participants to opt out of participating in an activity or discussion if they feel uncomfortable to share certain thoughts, feelings, etc.
- Hold participants to standards designed specifically with them in mind – older learners need purposes and goals to guide their efforts.
- Use a diversity of methods, materials, and means in order to address the variety of learning styles and skill levels.
- Put to good use the life experience of the older people, make them feel useful and valued.
- Validate the positive aspects in order to build confidence, facilitate the feeling of acceptance and respect.
- Create a pleasant learning atmosphere by addressing the needs of the learners: stimulate connections, include humour, music, or attractive activities and materials etc.
- Recognize the specific challenges that might come with age and address them accordingly. For example, use bigger fonts, adapt the training pace to accommodate fatigue, or reduce exercises which demand too much physical flexibility, etc.
- Stimulate social interaction between participants. For example, encourage group dynamics by breaking the whole group into smaller workgroups for certain tasks, and also remember to encourage connection outside the learning environment.
- Creating a safe space is an on-going process – it needs constant maintenance and the reality is that sometimes we can only create safer spaces. Yet, it is important that groups are gentle but also vigilant with constantly checking in.

RESOURCES:

True to Age, True to Gender Handbook: What adult educators and programme developers should know about older women's gender capital, social issues, and values. 2021.

Vauclair, Christin-Melanie et al. "[What do older people think that others think of them, and does it matter? The role of meta-perceptions and social norms in the prediction of perceived age discrimination.](#)" *Psychology and aging* vol. 31,7 (2016): 699-710. doi:10.1037/pag0000125

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PEW Research Center. "[Growing Old in America: Expectations vs. Reality](#)". 2009.

Panayotes Demakakos; University College London; Elizabeth Hacker National Centre for Social Research, Edlira Gjonça University College London. "[Perception of aging](#)." 2006.

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Project No: 2020-1-RO01-KA204-079845

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