

Dr Walentyna Wnuk

Doradca Prezydenta Miasta Wrocławia ds. Seniorów (Adviser on the Senior Citizen Matters to the President of the City of Wrocław)

walentywnuk@poczta.fm



A gerontologist, a scholar of social gerontology, and an academic teacher at the University of Wrocław. Head of the University of the Third Age (U3A) at the University of Wrocław in 1997–2006. Currently an adviser on the senior citizen matters to the president of the city of Wrocław. She was the head of Wrocławska Rada ds. Seniorów (Wrocław council for senior citizen matters) of the first term. Dr Walentyna Wnuk has worked with seniors for many years and was one of the precursors of the U3A. In 2006 Dr Wnuk was awarded the Złoty Medal Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego (the gold medal of the University of Wrocław), as well as the Medal Edukacji Narodowej (the medal of national education), and the Nagroda Wrocławia (the prize of Wrocław) for her work for the necessitous.

Promotion of active living among seniors. The essence – the aims – the opportunities and the limitations

Summary: The author provides a comprehensive description of the problem of promotion of active living among seniors based on research and professional experience. Promotion of active living among seniors is to be understood as a set of actions aimed at mitigating the process of ageing with the simultaneous development of competences necessary in senior life. The activity is considered "developmental living", regardless of its scope. The causes of inactivity and the opportunities for stimulation of activity are discussed, as well. The active lives of the U3A students serve as examples.

Key words: Promotion of active living, activity, models of being active, developmental activity, social exclusion.

To be active as a senior is not only to enjoy life and leisure time, but also to undertake the responsibilities of a participant in the life of the community: a district, a city, an association, and other people, in order to preserve cultural heritage.

[O. Czerniawska, *Style życia w starości*]

Introduction

I would like to strongly oppose the popular idea about the supposed inactive attitude of seniors that denies the need for their activity. Many of them do, in fact, believe that avoiding physical and intellectual activity are to ensure a long and healthy old age. Research leads to a contrary conclusion. An influential basic cultural tendency to value active living is to be taken into account. Activity is, therefore, a socially appreciated value that meets the need for a proper old age.

I believe that everyone feels the best when living in a work (a regular effort adapted to one's abilities) – leisure time (rest) routine. That is why it is necessary to provide the seniors with opportunities for sensible activity allowing them to be helpful and needed. Therefore, activity constitutes a lifelong emotional and social necessity, including old age. Seniors are happy to be able to undertake other activities in place of the professional and family ones.

The perception old age as a time of inactivity, inability, lack of chances of self-fulfilment, and weakening of intellect is slowly changing. Old age can be a positive stage in life, provided that seniors have the opportunity to lead active, creative lives. It is obvious that with age we are able to undertake less tasks. However, there is a great individual diversity. It is a popular belief that one's activity depends first and foremost on acquired routines and one's system of values. The need to participate in life does not change with age, if it is not limited by physically debilitating illness; those with no such needs, however, become even more inactive. That is why seniors can choose between activity as a realisation of their natural needs and inactivity, negation, or stagnation.

The noblest of ideas introduced in *Ustawa o pomocy społecznej* (social assistance act) that has taken effect on 12.03.2004¹⁾ is the idea of promoting active living among the residents of the DPS²⁾. The strategy constitutes a correct answer to the question: what to do to allow the residents of the DPS to lead more active lives. It is to encompass the aspects: 1. self-sufficiency, 2. establishing interpersonal contacts, 3. participation in organised activities, mainly occupational therapy.

¹⁾ Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2004 r. o pomocy społecznej, Dz.U. 2004.64.593 – social assistance act introduced on 12.03.2004 with subsequent changes.

²⁾ DPS – Dom Pomocy Społecznej (nursing homes, entirely or partially funded by the public authorities).

The research conducted under my supervision by students of andragogy indicates that the idea has not been implemented. The creation of new models of care requires years of work of teams of care assistants. It is necessary for the teams to include educated and well-trained people, whereas nowadays the care-assistants are often ill-prepared.

To conclude, it is to be assumed that activity constitutes a lifelong emotional and social necessity. **Promotion of active living among seniors is to be understood as a set of actions aimed at mitigating the process of ageing with the simultaneous development of competences necessary in senior life.** In order for the process to be effective the following are necessary:

- ❖ A clearly defined aim of the activities,
- ❖ Addressing genuine needs,
- ❖ Changes in attitude,
- ❖ Demonstrating new opportunities.

The social sciences theories confirming such understanding of the promotion of being active are the "theory of activity" in the field of gerontology, "creative old age model", "old age as a task", "productive old age", "lifelong development theory", "the idea of animation", "lifestyle as education", "developmental crises theory", or "the dynamic old age model".

Do the seniors need to be active?

Yes, if they value lifelong development according to the aforementioned theories related to positive ageing. It is the essence of maturing in humanity.

Development (developmental living) is an opportunity that one can take advantage of to age positively and with dignity. Making this choice leads to being active. That is why it is necessary to broaden one's knowledge and experience, to become involved in various activities, which provides a chance for a better understanding of the world around us. Stagnation leads to slow deterioration, loss of self-sufficiency, and, as a result, to exclusion. Being inactive means losing creative opportunities. **Active life of seniors in a developmental life.** Taking such attitude has various implications. There is no activity without development and no development without activity. Contemporary lifelong education is a part of one's social and cultural environment and it is no longer an exclusive field of the standard educational organizations. Nowadays socialising is considered yet another element of informal education.

Is developmental activity actually necessary for seniors?

I have no doubt that the answer should be a "yes", because of the seniors need of:

- new experiences,
- being helpful and feeling needed,
- revising their knowledge,

- social relationships,
- self-sufficiency,
- creativity and admiration,
- independent problem solving,
- ageing in dignity,
- realising childhood dreams,
- finding a meaning of life (reflection on life),
- improving skills and competences,
- participation in social and cultural life,
- bridging the generation gap,
- staying young (learning makes younger),
- staying fit,
- staying healthy to live longer,
- happiness,
- increasing self-esteem,
- acceptance of others,
- exchange of feelings and emotions,
- overcoming loneliness and the “feeling of emptiness”.

Through the realisation of the idea of lifelong education developmental activity encompasses four areas of activity (according to the standards proposed by E. Faure³⁾):

- learning in order to perceive,
- learning in order to take action,
- learning in order to live with others,
- learning in order to be.

These are the four pillars of lifelong learning.

Nowadays, developmental life is not available to the young exclusively. The illiterate today are those unwilling to study, learn, and break old negative habits⁴⁾.

Activity, therefore, allows for the realisation of most of human needs. However, from among the activities within the reach of one’s abilities one needs to choose those that one values the most and those that win recognition and bring satisfaction.

What is activity?

There are numerous definitions of activity:

- in biology – actions undertaken to sustain bodily functions,
- in psychology – an individual trait,
- in gerontology – a set of actions hindering the process of ageing,
- in andragogy – a human development factor,
- in medicine – illness prevention.

³⁾ E. Faure, *Uczyć się, aby być*, 1975.

⁴⁾ A. Toffler, *Trzecia fala*, Poznań 1997.

Therefore, being active is contemporarily considered a synonym a being alive, a crucial condition for development, a basis for the treatment of various illnesses, an opportunity for creative self-expression, and a regulation of social relations. It is a prophylactic endeavour, allowing for individual helpfulness taking into account the abilities, tastes, and habits; it is also essential to age with dignity.

In psychology of late maturity the "psychophysical" (i.e. exercise), "psychosocial" (social relations), "identity-related" (i.e. individual, the reflection on life), "metaphysical" (i.e. spiritual, with transgression as an act of going beyond oneself) forms of activity are considered. One has an opportunity to be active in all these aspects. Being active is essential in a certain philosophy of ageing, as proposed by gerontologists. It constructs a living space that becomes limited with age. It allows for the realisation of the seniors' potential (e.g. through voluntary work). It always constitutes a basis for retaining self-sufficiency and resourcefulness and, most certainly, mutual help in building a civil society. Being active provides a chance to challenge the negative stereotype of old age – a harmful product of contemporary society (the cult of youth). Therefore, all activities beneficial to physical health as well as emotional and social wellbeing constitute problems of interest to us. That is why self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, control of the social and cultural environment and establishing life goals constitute predictors of positive ageing along with physical health.

Being active as a senior becomes a decisive factor in defining the shape and size of one's living space. Living space is constructed by individual activity as well as social environment, i.e. the world of others, the community, the neighbourhood, and the family.

Presently, a major limitation of the living space of seniors is observed. It is a great problem, because seniors' social age is an expression of their social situation. Therefore, ageing is also a process triggered by a reaction to what is going on in the immediate environment of seniors, with the reach, the character and hierarchy of their social activity changing. In other words, seniors need to adapt to the new social and cultural situation. Participation of seniors in the life of the community is of crucial importance, because it allows for the benefitting from their potential, the prevention of alienation ("social death") and provides a chance to be active.

Being active, therefore, prevents social exclusion, provides working means, allows one to find a support group, and makes it possible to implement "senior to senior" counselling. Being active is also an indicator of the quality of a senior's life. It is necessary to be active in order to live in dignity; without it, life becomes merely a state of vegetation.

The motto of American gerontologists is: the aim of being active in old age is not just to add years to the lifespan, but to add life to the years⁵⁾. That implies the prolonging of the "youthful", active old age and impeding becoming senile,

⁵⁾ Z.R. Ryn, *Starość otwiera nam oczy*, „Charaktery” 1999, Issue 10.

disabled, unengaged, and passive. It is based on encouraging interests and hobbies and engaging in activities that bring satisfaction.

How to be active?

Intellectual, social, civic, cultural, religious, physical, home and family, professional, club, artistic, individual, tourist, hobby, internet, caretaking, and voluntary work are the forms of activity to be taken into consideration.

Multiple categories of seniors' activities are discussed in reference books. Therefore, the number of opportunities is great. "Everyday activities" (daily routine), "continued activities" (reading the newspapers, going for a walk), and "new activities" (learning to use computers, taking care of other seniors) are mentioned among others.

"Recreation and hobbies" (gardening, sports, and interests), "receptive activities" (watching TV and listening to the radio, using the internet), and "integration activities" (education and training, social life, community life: seniors' clubs, U3A⁶, associations, charity work) are discussed.

Among the activity categories "formal activities" (work within the associations), "informal activities" (consisting mainly of relationships with family members, friends, and neighbours), and "individual activities" (including watching TV, using the internet, reading, artistic development, writing diaries and letters) are specified.

Directions of activities are also to be indicated:

- for oneself (learning foreign languages),
- for the group (working with the local government),
- for the community (cooperation the DPS),
- for the family (taking care of grandchildren).

The activities undertaken are to address actual interests while at the same time remaining socially appreciated.

Hardly at all does the research⁷ that I have conducted among the seniors of Lower Silesia (mostly inhabitants of villages and small towns) confirm the vast number of opportunities to be active. The research results confirm the previously indicated passive lifestyle of seniors, with 90% of the elderly taking part in no social organisations whatsoever.

Only 4% of the surveyed declared taking active part in the works of social organisations – these were mostly men living in cities. Such low activity in associations is supplemented with work in church organisations, which are supposedly tailored for the seniors exclusively, with 3% of the surveyed active in this area. These were

⁶) U3A – University of the Third Age.

⁷) The research based on my professional interests and fulfilled functions related to the living standards of seniors in Lower Silesia conducted in 2007 by Dolnośląska Rada ds. Seniorów (Lower Silesian council for senior citizen matters) with the Marszałek Województwa Dolnośląskiego (Marshal of the Lower Silesia Voivodship). I was a co-initiator and a co-author of the resulting report, available on the Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Dolnośląskiego (Marshall Office of the Lower Silesia Voivodship) website.

mostly women living in villages. Only about 3,6% of the surveyed take part in organised activities, such as those of the so-called "seniors' clubs". These were relatively young men and women. Lack of access to such establishments in many towns may explain the low attendance.

What about the social relationships of the seniors? "Relationships with children and family members" were by far the most popular, with 50% of the answers indicating an everyday character of such contacts (due, probably, to living under one roof). 23% of the surveyed mentioned maintaining such contacts a few times a week. Single contacts in a week were declared in 3% of the answers, with a similar percentage indicating no contacts at all.

Despite being the second most popular form (with over 12% of the answers), "seeing friends" did not prove as important as had been expected. Yet, contacts of that sort allow for an exchange of services (mutual help) and support, while distracting from the monotony of everyday life. "Seeing social workers" constitutes a supplement of the possible social relationships. Only 2,5 % of the surveyed see social workers every day, while over 82% have never maintained such contacts. It seems that the need for social workers in the researched districts is low – is it an outcome of the lack of information about such opportunities?

What about "help of healthcare workers"? Only 0,5% of the surveyed seek daily medical advice, with over 20% admitting to having no contact with healthcare institutions. 8% of the seniors have appointments once a year, and 34% a few times a year or a month. The seniors are said to have "taken over" the healthcare institutions; however, the research results presented indicate that that is hardly the case. The availability of medical services, especially the specialised ones, is to be considered hereby.

Finally, we come to "seeing a priest" – 42% of the surveyed mentioned a single yearly contact (probably the Christmas pastoral visits), with 2% of the surveyed meeting a priest every day, and 20% indicating a lack of such contacts.

Are the surveyed interested in "further professional activity", which they have often lost the opportunity for (e.g. because of early retirement)? Over 46% of seniors answered positively to a possible continuation of work. EU standards postulate to encourage the elderly to become professionally active again (which includes voluntary work); however, 53,1% of the surveyed are not interested.

What models of being active are observed among seniors?

I will relate to the experience that I have gained as head of U3A at the University of Wrocław. It needs to be emphasized that the dynamically developing Universities of the Third Age may serve as examples of the actual opportunities related to the discussed problem. Therefore, the **models of being active observed** among the seniors at the U3A are:

- being highly active – participation in numerous activities organised by the U3A,
- making an effort to be active professionally, making the skills as e.g. foreign language teachers, therapists, lawyers, nurses, literature teachers, proofreaders, artists (mostly women) helpful,

- focusing on a single activity – a single, favourite area: singing in a choir, comedy, a foreign language, working with the local government,
- contemplation, reflection on life and its analysis, reconstructing personal experience, while withdrawing from other activities: the participants of workshops and seminars,
- leading, confirming the importance of being helpful and needed, with a strong awareness of responsibility for the U3A: members of the local government, voluntary workers, team and section leaders (mostly women, too),
- looking to receive the help and care from the immediate environment required to remain active: members of the mutual help groups,
- the "stars" with powerful personalities, not always cooperative within the groups, with the need to emphasize individual presence at the U3A, event organisers.

Each of the models requires a different type of help and psychological support and the development plans should vary.

In relation to the models of being active "the reformer", "the observer", "the devoted consumer", "the self-realising" (individual participation plan), "the leader", "the pretentious", "the inactive", and "the star" types can be discussed.

What are the reasons for being inactive?

With efficiency constituting the highest value for the modern man, life of the elderly is difficult. A selection is made into the "better" and the "worse" citizens, according to the division into the professionally active and the inactive. Yet, there are many opportunities of constructing the so-called efficiency of an individual.

The cult of youth is a serious barrier, with its grotesque form – the "youthful seniors". It is a form of rebellion against old age and passing away.

The rapid social and cultural changes require the ability to adapt, which is a typical feature of youth. Regardless of numerous technological advantages of modern civilisation, the seniors remain computer illiterate. The fear of growing old, not nearly as apparent in different times and cultures, is increasing every day.

Being inactive and passive attitude are results of a lack of individuality and conservative lifestyle. On the other hand, one may notice that many seniors nowadays are conscious of these facts and try hard to be as full of energy, as professionally successful, and even as good-looking as the young. When they cease to be efficient, they cease to be needed. And the unneeded may as well be "forgotten" and, as a result, lonely (the philosophy of increasing ageism). Seniors are withdrawn from the economic rat race. Therefore, they require stimulation through proper social policies. Furthermore, the difficult situation of the elderly in relation to the addressed problem is caused by the lack of stabilisation of their environment – they have got only themselves to rely on.

The complexity of the issue indicates the existence of inner and outer causes of being inactive. Personality, cultural, and social reasons may be mentioned. The list is long, with not all of them confirmed through research:

- lack of self-confidence,
- fear of negative reaction of others,
- health issues, depressive tendencies,
- family situation,
- lack of individuality,
- fear of being perceived as ridiculous (by the family),
- social expectations (negative stereotype of seniors),
- feeling of a lack of control in life,
- incorrect attitude towards life (withdrawal, aggression, dependency),
- lack of energy,
- hitherto prevailing lifestyle (lack of an active routine),
- technological progress and the resulting secondary illiteracy,
- egocentrism,
- low self-esteem,
- over-protectiveness (of the family, the social assistance),
- negative reflection on life,
- the economy,
- lack of local opportunities,
- ageism (among young people),
- fear of the new,
- lack of stability in the immediate environment,
- the media (the image of the elderly),
- architectural barriers,
- lack of ability of functioning beyond personal space,
- lack of the feeling of economic and social security,
- lack of skills necessary to function in organisations,
- being overly family-oriented and distrustful,
- loss of physical attractiveness,
- political barriers (incorrect social policies related to seniors),
- limited living space,
- lack of free time management skills,
- pension schemes (unchanging for years – “the young retired”).

Being inactive leads to faster emotional, physical, social, and cultural ageing. Seniors become emotionally and socially poor. Being inactive and the lack of relationships, help from others, and being helpful leads to a feeling of uselessness, harm, isolation, loneliness, and low self-esteem.

How to stimulate and promote active living?

I see many opportunities here, with the use of the methods of socio-cultural animation, among others. A presence of seniors animateurs in local communities appears to be of crucial importance. One must be made to take part in situations

requiring cooperation and relationships with others in a thought-out and planned way. Educational programmes consisting of work on awareness as part of gerontological prophylactics are to be considered. The promotion of learning as a lifestyle along with an amendment to the higher education act allowing for the opening of private and public universities to informal forms of education of seniors could be of great help.

The rising educational aspirations of the older generations would be addressed by new educational paths proposed by universities. Emphasis must be put on broad computer science education. These should be available in the local communities of seniors.

The chances for a change would doubtlessly be greatly increased with all attempts at promoting further professional activities along with voluntary work. Taking part in the activities of NGOs (in the developed countries seniors constitute a majority of voluntary workers) needs to be distinguished.

Organising retirement courses aimed at preparing people for the new social situation as well as development of gerontological counselling combined with organising mutual help groups and social support groups seem to be necessary.

Substituting the protective model with the educational model should be proposed as part of the change in the model of care of seniors.

The "youth" in old age lasts as long as the engagement in those and other forms of being active. Because one who feels the need to be active never gets old. One aware of the fact that his activities are as a "fountain of youth" is psychophysically fit and ready to help others. One is happy with his life; in other words, one feels his life in of relatively high quality.

Conclusion

Seniors need to be provided with opportunities to lead active lives again, because it is possible to organize and realize new tasks, undertake new goals, hobbies, and interests in old age. It is the seeking for adequate and satisfying substitutes for the lost social roles. It may be achieved through implementation of the propositions of proper social policies related to seniors:

- Promotion of taking active part in the life of the community as an element of social policies meeting the EU standards requires numerous opportunities aimed at support and stimulation along with organisation of voluntary work. Leisure time must be "experienced" rather than being empty and filled with watching TV. Various recreational, counselling, and information organizations are needed.
- Constructing new awareness – education of seniors as work on awareness.
- I propose to prolong professional careers according to EU standards (those incapable of work are to receive social aid).
- Integration, promotion of active living, and education of seniors are to be parts of the systemic solutions implemented by social assistance in order to actually contribute to changing the quality of the lives of seniors.

- Social policies must allow for the adapting of seniors to social changes in order for them to “keep up with life” and realise their potential.
- There are three main reasons of social exclusion: lifestyles of seniors, common stereotypes connected with the elderly, and low material status of seniors. Yet another, new reason appears – the increasing presence of computers in everyday lives.
- Support programmes for seniors require changes in the present social policies, which includes a reorganisation of certain elements of healthcare and social assistance systems.

In the integrating Europe there are numerous new models of seniors' active lives that may serve as examples. It is a model of seniors as active, creative, open, and self-aware people of the future. The social and cultural world that fills the living space of seniors gives deeper meaning to the existence, increases its value, while at the same time allowing for the perception a relatively high quality of life. The social and cultural space of one's life is not only constructed of the outside environment – the care, support, and cultural organisations, and cultural life of the community – but also of one's inner life – one's life philosophy, system of values, attitude towards old age, lifestyle, leisure time activities, and social relationships. Seniors should also feel responsible for this image. The responsibility of social policies appears to remain merely a proposition.

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