

Foreword

We all age. Active Aging, aging with well-being and a high quality of life, is one of the most important issues facing science and society in our time of increasing longevity and demographic change. Never before have so many people been able to live to such an advanced age. There has been an enormous extension of the life span during the last decades in all European countries, but also across the world. We live longer and remain more active into later life than our parents and grandparents. This is due to the progress of modern medicine, the improvement of socio-economic living conditions, and it is also very much influenced by lifestyles and human behavior. It is important to not just add years to life, but also to add life to years!

This very interesting and stimulating book, based on a critical analysis of the gerontological and especially psychological research literature on aging, emphasizes a new paradigm in scientific gerontology that has a more positive view of aging processes. What is “active aging,” “healthy aging,” “quality of life,” “successful aging,” “life satisfaction,” “well-being,” “positive aging”? Amongst many other things, this book also addresses these questions of definition. An analysis of the literature of the last decades shows an interesting development: In the 1960s, there were many articles on the subject of “life satisfaction,” followed some years later by the topic of “successful aging.” In the 1970s, the subject of “quality of life” came to prominence, originally introduced by medical doctors; and then in the 1980s and beyond, the topic of “subjective well-being” became dominant. Life satisfaction (in the sense of satisfaction with the development of one’s life as well as with the current situation) is recognized as an indicator of successful aging. Life satisfaction (often measured with a so-called “life satisfaction scale”) in this context is valued as an aspect of adjusting successfully to the aging process. As is shown in the following, the definition of all these concepts is very difficult. In the literature, they sometimes overlap and it is not possible to differentiate between them, and there is some confusion regarding theoretical and methodological concepts.

In this book, Rocío Fernández-Ballesteros makes a convincing case for a multidimensional, multilevel model of active aging, including several theoretical constructs, and states: “In conclusion, positive aging can be defined as the life-course adaptation process for arriving at an optimal physical (including health), psychological (optimal cognition and emotion-motivation regulation), and social functioning of the individual. Therefore, the promotion of active aging will imply the optimization of those conditions through biomedical, physical, psychological, and socio-environmental interventions. It should also be emphasized that pro-

moting active aging is preventing illness and disability, and increasing well-being in old age.” (p. 58)

Aging is not only a biological process; it is a process determined by a number of biological, social, psychological, and ecological factors. Healthy aging is active aging! The focus of this book is on active, healthy aging and the behavioral and psychosocial factors that contribute to it. Healthy aging is the result of a lifelong process. It is therefore necessary to optimize the development of the individual from early childhood on. We know that a variety of influences in early childhood, in adolescence, during early and middle adulthood, but also in the current living circumstances of the aged determine the processes of aging and well-being in old age.

Achieving healthy aging is a challenge for society but also for every individual. Measures of health promotion and primary prevention are necessary to maintain and increase competencies in later life. What can be done to secure a high quality of life in old age?

There are many studies that demonstrate that physical activity is a prerequisite for successful aging. Age-determined physical changes – such as functional impairments of the organs, changes in the motor and muscular system as well as changes in the respiratory organs (which, of course, depending on the individual, can appear at any age) – are similar to the effects brought about by a lack of exercise. A young but physically inactive individual seems old, just as an old but active individual appears young. Physical activity also has positive effects on psychological well-being by promoting mental abilities, subjective well-being, social skills, and self-concept.

Cognitive activity is another prerequisite for successful aging. Many studies have found that mentally active individuals who have a wide range of interests, a time perspective reaching farther into the future, and a larger number of social contacts reach old age with greater feelings of psycho-physical well-being than those who lack such activity and perspective. It has been established that cognitive activity is essential for healthy aging. It is therefore, important that older people have mental tasks – they must be challenged to mental activity, as a reduction in such activity can speed up the process of aging.

Emotional and motivational functioning influences healthy and active aging. Aging is associated with life-change units and such changes require adaptation and adjustment; elderly people sometimes have to cope with multiple critical life events. Last but not least, social functioning and social participation also have an influence on healthy and active aging.

“Promoting active aging” is the main goal of this very important book, which aims to strengthen a theory- and research-based practical approach, a program for healthy active aging. Overall, we need a more positive view of aging; we have to do everything we can to change the negative image of the aged into a more realistic one. Old age is every young person’s future, so we have to strengthen every individual’s physical, cognitive, emotional-motivational, and social devel-

opment from very early on in life. In this, health promotion is the most important prerequisite for active aging. This is a challenge for psychologists, who can contribute to effecting behavioral changes towards healthier behavior. To promote aging well, to achieve long life as free of disability as possible, and to reduce morbidity at the end of life should be the aim of the necessary multidomain-based, multidimensional intervention programs. “The process of aging well, at the individual, community, and population level, depends on complex psychological self-regulation functioning because the individual is always an active agent who requires the exercise of control.” (p. 154)

Old age and longevity should not be seen as a problem but as a chance and a challenge – a challenge for everyone: for the aging individual, for their family, and for our society. We should not only talk about the losses, problems, and deficits of aging and old age. We have to talk about – and we have to open our eyes to – the potentials of the elderly, and also the competencies and potentials of the very old. We have to see the aged of the 21st century as human capital. This book will help to such a new view of the older population.

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