



PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF FORMING A POSITIVE IMAGE OF SEXUALITY IN OLD AGE

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Abstract

Gerontology, due to social taboos, largely ignores the importance of the sexual-erotic aspect of the life of older people. Negative age stereotypes can lead to age discrimination, also known as ageism. As a result, older people are often denied the right to sexual activity, perpetuating the construction of old age through the mechanisms of control over sexuality. Ageist stereotypes associated with sexuality in old age can significantly affect the quality of life, psychological well-being and self-esteem of older people.

In this article, the development of a training program is explored, which seeks to cultivate a positive outlook on sexuality amongst the elderly. The program delves into psychosexual issues related to old age, with a particular emphasis on fostering a more positive attitude towards sexuality by addressing factors such as body image, sexual health and behavior in old age. The content of this training focuses older people on the legitimization of the topic of sexuality in old age, openness and the possibility of dialogue on the topic.

Keywords: *sexuality, psychosexual issues, old age, ageism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexuality, intimacy, and sexual relationships are not only basic human needs and rights, but also crucial for maintaining mental and physical health at any age. However, society has long held a taboo on discussing sexuality in the elderly, with relevant literature and discourse only emerging in recent times. According to Akimova (2005), *sexuality* is a set of mental and physiological reactions, experiences, and actions. It is an integral part of human life, present from birth to death, and contributes to feelings of love, intimacy, self-confidence, and joy. Psychosomatically, sexuality represents a unique non-verbal form of communication that conveys passion, affection, trust, security, and satisfaction, making it indispensable in interpersonal relationships. Regrettably, social gerontology has largely ignored the importance of the sexual-erotic dimension of older adults' lives

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due to societal taboos. Consequently, insufficient attention has been given to promoting a positive outlook on sexuality in old age and exploring this topic. The continuing taboo on the topic of sexuality in old age stems from ageist stereotypes, which unfortunately affect both the elderly themselves and the specialists who work with them such as gerontologists, nurses, social and patronage workers, psychologists. Negative age stereotypes can lead to age discrimination, also known as ageism. Studies have shown that older adults internalize negative stereotypes, which can negatively impact their physical, cognitive, and psychological health (Bodrug-Lungu, Sevciuc, 2018). As a result, older adults are often denied the right to sexual activity, perpetuating the construction of old age through the mechanisms of control over sexuality. Ageist stereotypes related to sexuality in old age can significantly impact the quality of life, psychological well-being, and self-esteem of older individuals (Balode, Grecu-Stavila, 2020). Sexual stereotypes about old age are unfortunately internalized by the elderly themselves, leading to negative impacts on their behavior and psychological well-being. These attitudes, which are both misleading and damaging, often cause older people to reject their needs and abilities. This can result in a loss of self-confidence, the suppression of erotic feelings, and a reluctance to seek out contact, love, warmth, and intimacy.

There is an unmet need to promote realistic views on sexuality in older age, challenge ageist perceptions, and to enable older persons to express their sexuality and sexual identity freely and fully. In the review and analysis of scientific literature on the topic, we noticed the lack of training methods for developing a positive image of sexuality in old age. Training programs on sexuality and psychotherapeutic techniques are often designed for adolescents and adults, making them irrelevant and inappropriate for the elderly. Nevertheless, practitioners working with older people have observed that sexuality remains a pressing concern for many individuals over 60 years old (Agarcov, 2011). As the global population continues to age, it is critical for specialists to promote high-quality, psychologically fulfilling lives for older people, who can remain socially active and valuable members of society. To address this gap, we developed an original training program entitled "Formation of a positive image of sexuality in old age" that integrates specific principles for addressing sexuality and psychological well-being in older people.

2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The training program, "Formation of a positive image of sexuality", is based on the humanistic psychology concept of psychological well-being by Ryff (2014) and the conceptual understanding of sexuality in old age (DeLamater, 2012).

According to the theory of Ryff (1995), the concept of "psychological well-being" is defined as an integral indicator of the degree of a person's orientation towards the implementation of the main components of positive functioning, as the degree of realization of this orientation, subjectively expressed in a feeling of happiness, satisfaction with oneself and one's own life. According to Ryff (2014), the selected components of psychological well-being correlate with various

structural elements of theories, in which one way or another we are talking about the positive functioning of the individual.

In our opinion, intimate relationships and sexual satisfaction are one of the important components of happiness and a source of positive emotions. As a result of an increase in the level of psychological well-being, a person develops a more positive outlook on himself and his life, thereby increasing faith in his abilities and in planning his life. It is worth noting that this matters not only for a particular person, for his self-feeling of happiness and satisfaction with his life, but also for society as a whole, since the more people are satisfied with their lives and at the same time function positively, the lower the psycho-emotional stress will be in society.

Along with a positive body image, we propose to introduce the concept of a positive image of sexuality in old age. Body image is a person's perception of their own body. Those feelings, sensations and emotions that he experiences in relation to his own body. In turn, a positive body image is not just a knowledge of where and what is, but also an understanding of the attractiveness of your body to others. Recently, within the framework of the concepts of positive psychology, a new and increasingly popular direction in psychology, a new approach to the study of body image has emerged, contributing to a shift in emphasis from the negative aspects of the body image to the positive (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). In society and among the representatives of the elderly group, often negative ideas about their sexuality are common. This is due to numerous taboos and clichés: "sex is only for the young", "older people do not have sex", "sex is only needed for childbearing", etc. Thus, in contrast to negative ideas about sexuality in old age, we propose to consider a positive image of sexuality in old age.

Undoubtedly, there are factors that influence the image of sexuality in old age. One of the factors influencing the idea of sexuality in old age is his personality. If a person was previously quite sexually active, then in old age there is a high probability that he will remain sexual. Thus, sexuality in adulthood must be considered in the context of each person's personality.

A positive image of sexuality in old age is an understanding of one's sexuality as a combination of a positive attitude towards the body as an instrument of sexuality, active sexual behavior and a subjective understanding that a person can be a sexual object at any age.

3. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES

3.1. OBJECTIVE

In order to form a positive attitude to sexuality in old age, we have developed a training program. The developed training program for the formation of a positive image of sexuality in old age is aimed at solving the following tasks: expanding knowledge about the peculiarities of sexual health in old age; formation of knowledge about the concept of psychological well-being among training participants; formation of aspiration for self-discovery, immersion in their inner world and orientation in it; formation of a positive image of the body in old age; expansion of ideas about sexual behavior and sexuality in old age. The goal of our

training is to change as much as possible the negative attitudes and ideas of older people about sexuality in the golden age.

3.2. HYPOTHESES

The hypothesis of the formative part of the study is the assumption that a targeted impact on the idea of sexuality, in order to form a positive image of sexuality in old age, contributes to an increase in the level of psychological well-being of older people.

4. METHOD

The selected form of work in the training - group work - seemed to be the most effective for achieving the set goals in training sessions with small groups under the guidance of a psychologist. Interaction in a group is much more intense and varied than in individual therapy. Accordingly, the emotional experience is much richer. As a result, it significantly reduces the duration of exposure to obtain the maximum expected result. In a group, members receive feedback from other members of the group, which in itself is very valuable.

The advantage of group therapy is the opportunity to open up, interacting with other participants, to better understand yourself to raise self-esteem and self-confidence. The tension in the group helps to solve psychological problems when a special atmosphere is formed between the participants in the process of work. Paradoxically, the member benefits from the group even if he is silent or helps the other members solve their problems. He adopts someone else's experience, shares his own experience, which increases his self-esteem, learns constructive ways of communication from others, and does a lot of other extremely important and valuable things.

We believe that within the framework of training training technologies, as well as based on the model of sexuality in old age developed by us, it is possible to form positive ideas about one's own sexuality in old age, which in turn contributes to an increase in the level of psychological well-being.

The specifics of building a training on the topic of sexuality. After analyzing the available practical classes on the topic of sexuality, we made the following conclusions on the construction of the training:

1. At the initial stage of work, it is imperative to discuss and accept the rules of group work: confidentiality, respect for each other, I-messages, non-judgmental, etc.

2. It is important to assess the risks in your work: the sufficiency of time, the analysis of the composition of participants and possible difficulties, the experience of group work, the facilitator's own traumatic experiences on the stated topic, etc.

3. It must be understood that the topic of sexuality contributes to a rapid immersion in an intimate, personal process of experiencing relationships with another, which brings to the surface of consciousness complex memories, emotions and, possibly, painful feelings. The facilitator should be aware that he may have to work with clients' traumatic experiences.

The specifics of building training for the elderly. It must be borne in mind that

with age, older people can become more vulnerable and sometimes withdraw into themselves. With age, there may be a containment of one's own experiences, resentments and emotions that have not been properly responded to and processed properly. All this is likely to have a negative impact on the general health of an elderly person and psychological well-being.

Psychological exercises for the elderly are aimed primarily at relieving internal stress. Their main purpose is to create the most comfortable emotional background, the joy of life, curiosity and the desire to communicate. In working with people of late ages, it is necessary to apply specific methods that would reflect the structure of emotional experiences characteristic of a given period of ontogenesis.

The developed training program consists of 3 blocks.

1. Introductory block. The purpose of this introductory stage is to get the group members acquainted with each other, establish an informal style of communication, create favorable conditions for working in the group, clarify the rules and other organizational issues, as well as prepare participants for the main training block. In the process of passing through this stage, exercises aimed at organizing acquaintance and creating a favorable atmosphere in the group, familiarization with the topic of the training, as well as exercises aimed at working with the expectations of the participants were used. To achieve the goal in this training block, various exercises were used, including those proposed by the author. For example, *Exercise "Leaf of well-being"*.

Description of the exercise.

Time: 40 min.

Purpose: formation of knowledge among the participants of the training about the concept of psychological well-being and sexuality.

Materials: hat, paper, pens, board, markers.

Instruction: each of the participants receives a blank sheet, in which he himself must think over and write down from 3 to 5 concepts for 5 minutes, which, in his opinion, constitute the concept of psychological well-being.

Discussion: Participants put their lists in a header. The leader of the training randomly extracts someone's list, reads it out and writes the concepts on the board (breaking them into conditional topics: health, financial situation, knowledge, travel, etc.). As a result of the exercise, a conceptual tree for the term psychological well-being will appear on the board. Each of the participants has the right to supplement the resulting list.

2. Main block. At this stage, the main psychological work is carried out, aimed at mastering the knowledge by the participants of the training on the topic of sexuality in old age and the formation of a positive image of sexuality in old age. According to our study, four factors are important for the formation of a positive image of sexuality in old age: changing stereotypes about sexuality, sexuality and sexual health, sexual behavior and attitude towards the body. To solve the problems of this stage, we also developed some exercises and techniques. In particular:

1. *Exercise: "Collage. Stereotypes in reverse"*

Time: 35 min.

Purpose: the participants' awareness of the influence of stereotypes about old

age on the sexual sphere of older people, the loosening of generally accepted stereotypes in society about the sexual sphere of older people.

Materials: old illustrated magazines with lots of pictures, scissors, glue, markers, felt-tip pens, drawing paper.

Instructions: Group members are divided into 3 groups. The facilitator gives the group members a list with the main ageist stereotypes associated with sexuality in old age.

Sample list:

- Sex and love are the prerogative of the young
- Sex can be harmful to health in old age
- Older body can't be sexy
- Sexual desire decreases with age
- The main social role of an elderly person is grandparents
- A man at any age should be the initiator of sexual intimacy
- For a successful sexual life, a man needs a young partner
- In old age it is impossible to find a partner

The task of the participants is to choose any stereotypes from the list and illustrate them using a collage. The content of the collage should be opposite in meaning to the stereotype chosen by them (i.e., illustrate a non-stereotype, and show a different picture - an "anti-stereotype".) At the end of the exercise, each group demonstrates the result of their work and there is a joint discussion.

2. Exercise: "Sculpture of my sexuality"

Time: 45 min.

Materials: colored plasticine.

Purpose: removal of emotional and behavioral enslavement in relation to one's own sexuality.

Instructions: This exercise consists of three stages.

The first is that the participants choose the color or colors of the plasticine and must mold it into a figure that would most fully reflect their idea of their sexuality.

The second - the participant shows the group his figure, describes it. Then the whole group proposes a name for the composition.

The third is a discussion of the diversity of the obtained "sculptures about sexuality", the search for common and different, the construction of a "collective sculpture of sexuality".

3. Exercise "Blow of the Wind"

Time: 25 min.

Materials: basket, light colored scarves, music.

Purpose: bodily liberation of group members.

Instructions: The exercise consists of two parts.

This exercise is accompanied by musical accompaniment.

First part: participants choose one scarf from the basket. Then everyone should greet the rest of the participants without words, but with some gesture, movement, using a handkerchief.

Second part: participants are asked to come up with one or more movements that would reflect their sexual attractiveness. A movement that answers the question:

"How can I show my attractiveness? How can / can I attract the attention of a partner?". Then each of the group members should show this movement in front of the group (it is possible to use it from the handkerchief from the first part of the exercise).

Completion: all participants share their emotions and impressions. A possible question for discussion is "Can you do it in society, in another place?"

4. *Exercise: "Profile in a social network"*

Time: 30 min.

Materials: sheets of A4 paper, colored markers, pencils, pen, board, stickers.

Purpose: to introduce participants to the possibilities of communication and new acquaintances in social networks.

Instruction: participants are invited to create and fill out a personal page on a social network, which would reflect the most important information about themselves, in their opinion. It can be both formal and informal data.

For example: first name and last name, or only the first name that is preferred; area of activity or hobbies; personal contacts (e-mail, phone) at will; a personal slogan or phrase that most clearly reflects personal beliefs, any other thoughts, words, ideas that are important to the participant.

The resulting profiles can be hung on the walls around the entire perimeter of the room and invite the group to: familiarize themselves with the profiles of other participants (s); put a "like" by drawing a symbol in the form of a heart or using self-adhesive stickers; leave comments. At the end of the intragroup discussion.

Recommendations to the coaching team: draw the attention of participants to issues related to the preservation and dissemination of personal information. If someone does not want to provide personal contacts, he may not do so.

5. *Exercise: "Recommendations from the elderly to the Ministry of Health"*

Time: 25 min.

Materials: sheets of A4 paper, pencils, pens, markers, board.

Purpose: to expand the understanding of sexual health among older people and the role of government agencies in this area.

Instructions: Team members receive blank sheets of paper and within 10 minutes must develop recommendations for the Ministry of Health on how to improve sexual health services for older people. Then the participants are divided into two groups and develop a common list of recommendations.

At the end, both groups present their recommendations, and the facilitator combines the ideas into a single program.

3. Final block. The main goal of the final block is the emotional completion of the training process, receiving feedback from the participants of the training. This stage of work with the group is important, since it is at this stage that the results of the work are summarized, the acquired skills are clarified and integrated. We used, for example, such exercises:

1. *Exercise "Suitcase, basket, meat grinder"* (Gorbushina, 2008)

Time: 15 min.

Purpose: summarizing the lesson.

Materials: sheets of large format paper, multi-colored leaves, felt-tip pens,

adhesive tape.

Instruction: Participants are offered three large sheets, on one of which a huge suitcase is drawn, on the second - a wastebasket and on the third - a meat grinder. On a yellow piece of paper, which is then glued to a poster with a picture of a suitcase, it is necessary to draw (write) that important point that the participant learned from work (in a group, in class), is ready to take with him and use in his life.

On a blue piece of paper - what turned out to be unnecessary, useless and what can be sent to the "trash can", that is, attached to the second poster.

A gray sheet is something that turned out to be interesting, but not yet ready for use in your life. Thus, what needs to be thought out, finalized, "finished up" is sent to the "meat grinder", that is, attached to the third poster.

The leaflets are written anonymously and, as soon as they are ready, are glued by the participants themselves. Then there is a general discussion.

5. RESULTS

The experimental group consisted of 16 cognitively intact, heterosexual elderly people living in Israel (11 women and 5 men), from three age subgroups: 5 participants (1 man and 4 women) aged 62-71 years: 6 participants (2 men and 4 women) aged 72-79 years, 5 participants (2 men and 3 women) over 80 years old. The average age of the participants in the experimental group was 72.6 years.

At the first stage of the analysis of the effectiveness of the training program, a repeated diagnosis of the characteristics of sexuality and psychological well-being was carried out among the participants in the experimental group. The participants were tested according to the same diagnostic scheme as in the ascertaining experiment: the study of the characteristics of sexuality (the questionnaire "Features of the sexuality of people 60+") and the subjective feeling of psychological well-being (the Ryff test).

Analyzing the quantitative results of the questionnaire "Features of the sexuality of people 60+" before and after the experiment, it can be noted that in the experimental group there were positive changes in the level of severity of the studied parameter.

Checking the significance of the observed differences, carried out using the Student's T-test, showed that on all scales of the questionnaire, the differences before and after the experiment in the experimental group were significant (Table 1).

Table 1 – The results of the T-test to the questionnaire "Features of the sexuality of people 60+" (before and after the experiment)

Test	Re-test	T-test	Significance level, p	Scale
3,96	4,53	-5,084	0,00	Stereotype about sexuality
3,43	3,77	-6,928	0,00	Sexual behavior
3,76	4,15	-6,333	0,00	Sexual health
3,86	4,09	-3,563	0,05	Attitude to the body
3,37	4,68	-9,838	0,00	General sexuality

Let us consider the results of the questionnaire "Psychological well-being" in the experimental group before and after the experiment. Checking the significance of observed differences using Student's t-test showed that for 4 out of 6 parameters of the questionnaire the differences before and after the training in the experimental group were significant, and for the rest there is a tendency to improve the indicators (Table 2.).

Table 2 – The results of the T-test to the questionnaire "Psychological well-being" (before and after the experiment)

Test	Re-test	T-test	Significance level, p	Scale
63,0	64,3	-1,890	0,078	Positive relationship
59,1	59,6	-1,145	0,270	Autonomy
59,1	60,7	-3,058	0,05	Environment management
55,5	57,6	-3,232	0,05	Personal growth
55,8	57,8	-2,717	0,05	Goals
61,2	62,7	-2,234	0,05	Self-acceptance
353,5	362,68	-3,478	0,05	Integral indicator

The changes that have taken place in the average indicators indicate that participation in the program for the formation of a positive image of sexuality in old age had a positive effect on the level of psychological well-being of the participants in the experimental study, which is statistically confirmed (Table 2). We can note that the level of the "Personal Growth" scale significantly increased in the elderly from the experimental group ($t=-3,232$ at $p\leq 0,05$), which indicates that the training participants felt the strength and desire to develop, gain new experience. In addition, they had new goals in life ($t = -2,717$ at $p\leq 0,05$) - participation in the training allowed them to take a fresh look at their own lives and see in it not only lost opportunities, but also potential. New ways of building relationships with a partner and dealing with their own sexuality allowed older people to comprehend the experience and build new life strategies. This is also reflected in the new opportunities to manage the environment ($t=-3,058$ at $p\leq 0,05$) – older people felt that they could change the existing order of their lives for the better and could create conditions suitable for meeting their personal needs. It can also be noted that after participating in the training program, the results of the "Self-acceptance" scale increased in older people ($t = -2,324$ at $p\leq 0,05$), which indicates that the work on the formation of a positive image of sexuality has also influenced the general self-concept. Older people began to feel more positive about themselves, learned to see and highlight their positive qualities and blame themselves less for the presence of negative qualities.

The results of statistical analysis also demonstrate the presence of significant differences in the overall level of psychological well-being in the experimental group before and after the experiment. And despite the fact that this level does not go beyond the average level of psychological well-being, according to the interpretation of the diagnostic methodology, we still see a significant increase in this indicator after the formative experiment ($t=-3,478$ at $p\leq 0,05$). Thus, we can conclude that

participation in the formative experiment program had a positive impact on the level of general psychological well-being of older people.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Discourses about aging are based on the assertion that with age, abilities decrease, desires disappear, skills are lost, and aging is socially assessed as degradation and defeat of a person, which creates stereotypes that stigmatize and marginalize older people. However, older people have their own understanding of aging and give it their own meaning, different from that which prevails in society. Themes such as sexuality, intimacy, emotionality and sensuality cannot be evaluated in the same way at different periods of the human life cycle. Elderly people have their own meanings and values, including those regarding sexual relations.

According to the European Programme of Work “United Action for Better Health” (WHO, 2021), adults who manage their lives have great potential to participate in the economic and social life of society and, accordingly, can lead an active life position. Sexual health can indeed be used as one of the indicators of positive health trends contributing to the achievement of the main goal of Health. However, in modern research, there is not enough research on the sexual sphere of older people. This is partly due to the fact that studies of the elderly group in the field of sexual health of the population have not yet been a priority problem, since aging is often seen as a process that is more associated with problems, shortcomings and taboos, that is, as the final involutive period of life than as a complete and significant part of the life cycle. In addition, sexuality and sexual relations are the driving force behind the social activity of a person at any age, since it is aimed at achieving not only sexual satisfaction, but also positive emotions and psychological well-being.

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