



Physical Activity

MEANINGFUL LIFESTYLE ACTIVITIES

This evidence theme on physical activity is a summary of one of the key topics identified by a scoping review of research on meaningful lifestyle activities in aged care.

Key points

- Physical activity is important for the health and wellbeing of older people, meaningful physical activity is important to increase life satisfaction.
- To motivate older adults to participate, physical activities need to be enjoyable, offer social interaction, and be tailored to the individual's functional ability and interests.
- Meaningful physical activities should be tailored to the individual and led by trained professionals who are familiar to and trusted by older adults.

What is physical activity?

Physical activity is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure and includes activities for leisure, transportation, or as part of a person's occupational duties. [1] Participating in physical activity is particularly important for older adults to maintain mobility and physical function. Guidelines suggest that adults over the age of 65 should participate in physical activities focusing on cardiovascular fitness, balance, and strength training at moderate intensity or higher for 30-minutes at least three times a week. [1] However, being physically active can be challenging for older people because of age-related changes such as reduced muscle mass, flexibility, and an increased number of chronic health conditions. [2] Therefore, aged care services need to provide physical activities that individuals are interested in and that support participation for those with declining functional abilities.

Meaningful physical activity in aged care

We found several systematic reviews that explore the experiences of health care personnel in supporting physical activity for aged care residents as well as research that reports the attitudes and preferences of older people relating to exercise. [3, 4] This theme also describes some of the factors shown to increase or decrease a person living with dementia from participating in group activities [5]

What makes specific physical activities 'meaningful' to older adults will be unique to the individual and dependent on factors such as personality, interests, and life history. When a person is unable to participate in a physical activity that they find meaningful, this can affect their mood and leave them with a reduced sense of satisfaction with life. [3]

Factors preventing participation in meaningful physical activities

Older adults in aged care report that physical limitations, pain, fear of falling, and other comorbidities can prevent them from participating in the physical activities they previously enjoyed. [5] Other barriers reported include:

- Staff safety concerns for residents with poorer health
- Lack of appropriate spaces to perform physical activities
- A lack of staff available to provide and support physical activities
- Low motivation of staff and older adults to participate. [5]

Factors promoting participation in meaningful physical activity

People could be encouraged to successfully participate in physical activities by programs tailored and adapted to their own capabilities. Other factors shown to encourage and motivate older adults to participate include:

- Programs delivered by familiar staff members capable of supporting individuals to participate and to be successful in their activity
- Social recognition and encouragement from others
- Enjoyable activities that include social engagement with others in a group (although this was not a motivating factor for all aged care residents)
- Physical activity connected to functional tasks and continued independence. [4, 5]

Examples of meaningful physical activities

The research describes a wide range of physical activities with physical and mental benefits that aged care staff can provide to people at various levels of physical and cognitive ability. However, unless an activity has meaning for an elderly person, it is unlikely they will enjoy it or see any benefit in participating in it.

Dance is a physical activity that some, but not necessarily all, older adults may find more enjoyable, socially engaging, and therefore preferable to more class-based repetitive activities. Dancing is recommended as a meaningful physical activity, particularly for those who enjoyed dancing prior to requiring aged care. [7] Physical activities considered meaningful to older adults may include:

- Walking and discovery walks
- Lawn bowls or skittles
- Cycling
- Yoga
- Pilates
- Tai Chi

Gardening is another example of a potentially meaningful physical activity. This activity is covered in detail in the 'Nature-based Activities' evidence theme available on the ARIAA website.

What can an individual do?

Individuals can help to support engagement in meaningful physical activities by:

- Asking questions and understanding what activities individuals have found enjoyable and interesting throughout their life.
- Offering physical activities that cater to different interests and preferences. For example, some people may be drawn to mind-body exercises performed in quiet spaces while others will prefer more vigorous activities that include opportunities for social interaction.
- Provide encouragement, positive feedback and recognise the efforts made by older adults participating in physical activities.

What can an organisation do?

Organisations can support the integration of meaningful physical activities into aged care by:

- Carry out thorough assessments to determine the abilities of individual aged care users. Designing or sourcing programs that cater to all levels of ability.
- Support staff to tailor physical activities to the needs and interests of the individual so that they are more likely to be 'meaningful' and encourage participation.
- Provide appropriate environments to support programs offering meaningful physical activities to all older adults.

Evidence limitations

This evidence theme has been informed by the results of a rapid scoping review intended to map the current published research in this area. We acknowledge that our findings reflect only the limited evidence available concerning the concept of 'meaningful' physical activities. Furthermore, our Evidence Advisory Group (EAG) and practice professionals suggest this evidence may not adequately reflect the understanding and practical implementation of meaningful lifestyle activities in aged care.

References

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