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Mindful Ageing

POLICY FRAMEWORK REPORT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing share of the elderly population will lead to higher expenditures in public finances, i.e. higher expenditures for pensions, long-term care, health care, education.

As population ageing tendencies increase each decade, present models of health service delivery will be challenged to cope with the new realities and demands. Support services would need to be further developed, and quality should be improved. Particular attention should be paid to both public (i.e. formal health services and long-term care) and informal care (i.e. family and friends).

POPULATION AGEING IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES THAT EUROPEAN SOCIETIES FACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY.



Staff should be trained, and tailored support programmes should be developed, home care should be further supported and expanded.

As older people in Europe live longer, it is important to provide them with enough options to make the most of their retirement. This is where the concept of active ageing comes in. It means "enabling" older adults to

remain healthy and productive long after their retirement and thus be able to take advantage of their longer lives. Studies confirm that older people are more likely to maintain their physical and mental health by remaining active and preserving their social contacts. This may also improve their chances of a happier retirement with higher levels of life satisfaction.



Contrariwise, social exclusion and isolation amongst older people are global issues. The global crisis resulting from COVID-19 is currently highlighting the need for older people to be strong in themselves, both physically and mentally, but also to have strong social networks to help them stay positive and maintain contact with others as much as possible through crisis situations. Mental wellbeing has an impact on physical wellbeing. Mental disorders are responsible for almost one case out of ten for the loss of autonomy of senior citizens. Prevention is essential in the field of mental health. Fostering leisure activities, having a rich social life to fight isolation and loneliness, practising regular physical activity, maintaining a stable family environment and preserving one's intellectual life are all factors that make it possible to maintain one's mental health.



Mindfulness is recognised as a promising, low-cost and non-invasive intervention that can potentially buffer against cognitive decline or impairment.

Developed to address and further explore these challenges, Mindful Ageing is a 36-month project aimed to help older people, from before retirement age and after, create a positive mindset towards ageing and take an active approach to wellbeing. Launched in September 2020, it is supported by the Erasmus + Programme of the European Commission (EC) and is implemented by six partner organisations from Bulgaria, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland and the UK. The research that contributed to the development of the present [Mindful Ageing Policy Framework Report](#) aimed to provide comprehensive background information on the existing policies and support programmes in the field of active ageing and mental wellbeing of older adults (aged 50+), who are particularly at risk of isolation across Europe. It also provides an overview of first-hand experiences with the current attitudes and awareness of older adults on active ageing, Mindfulness techniques and similar tools to maintain positive mindsets and solid mental wellbeing.

ATTITUDE AND PARADIGMS RELATED TO AGEING

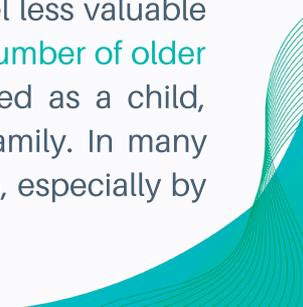
The ageing of the population is a trend that is likely to continue in the future, and our societies need to learn and adapt to this new reality. The idea of moving out of work and moving into retirement is particularly attractive for many people. However, after reaching this stage, many people come face to face with the issues of loneliness, social isolation, mental health, reduced mobility, feeling useless, lack of motivation and low self-esteem, fear of death, insufficient pension, etc. People in their older years share different attitudes and paradigms towards ageing.



Many people relate to retirement as a positive experience as they felt as though they had fulfilled their career expectations and deserved some time relaxing. People with a positive attitude towards ageing and retirement have plans and feel optimistic to begin this new chapter of their lives, i.e. going on vacations, new hobbies, more time for reading books, doing voluntary community work, etc.

Others associate ageing and retirement with physical decay and health problems.

The changes in the body during this period e.g., loose skin, sexual dysfunction, etc., burden older people's mood and mental health. They feel that they are another person who has no meaning in their life. They have given up some of their previous activities and are locked in their home mainly after their retirement. According to some participants in the research, people tend to feel less valuable to society even after 70 years old. **As they get older, a significant number of older people fear loneliness, social exclusion and ageism**, being treated as a child, neglected by society and feeling unhappy losing contact with family. In many countries, older people are subject to discrimination and exclusion, especially by younger generations.





Also, it is important to consider that older people's attitude towards retirement and ageing varies significantly from country to country due to the cultural and economic aspects that might influence the process. For example, Bulgarian pensioners are afraid that their pension benefits would not be enough to allow them to live their older days the way they imagined. The elderly are particularly vulnerable to poverty due to their limited earning potential and their low pension benefits. Also, older adults who live alone are much more likely to be poor. Physical and mental health issues hinder a person's ability to take on daily activities, leading to isolation, exclusion, poverty, etc. **This is why remaining active and healthy is so important for people in their later years.** From the perspective of experts and social workers, in many cases, older adults tend to isolate themselves when they lose some of their physical abilities because they fear showing others that they are no longer the same as they used to be, which leads to a loss of confidence and loss of joy. **This shows that mental health and physical wellbeing are connected.**



BENEFITS OF HAVING A POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS AGEING AND AN ACTIVE LIFESTYLE



According to most older people and experts, providing social services to the elderly that we have interviewed, the most important benefit of having a positive onset to ageing is the proven fact that it helps prevent depression and social exclusion. Coping with these two issues is the most important factor contributing towards a longer life. It is important to keep active and keep the brain moving in order to not feel isolated. However, it is challenging to teach a person a positive attitude towards a concept, especially active ageing, when he/she is not open to such a perception.



As part of their own concept for active ageing, there are different activities and paths that older people take after retirement across Europe. Some engage in employment, many turn to an active lifestyle (e.g. sports, hiking, etc.), others volunteer for their communities or learn new skills. Others practice farming, turn to religion, etc. Keeping oneself active is one of the keys to successful ageing. However, according to many support workers, in some countries (i.e. Bulgaria and Greece), the positive attitude towards ageing is not promoted at all, especially to people who already face social exclusion, isolation and depression. There are no nationwide campaigns, media promotion activities, etc. As a result, the majority of older people feel isolated from society. Stereotypes also mean that older adults are constantly prevented from being engaged in various activities (i.e. community work, volunteering, helping other people in need, etc.).

AWARENESS ON MINDFUL AND SUCCESSFUL AGEING

As part of the research that supported the present report, it was identified that many older people were also not familiar with the concept of mindfulness. The level of knowledge and interest of older people towards mindful ageing and positive psychology methods (meditation, yoga, sophrology, Neuro-linguistic Programming, Positive psychology, etc.) for achieving wellbeing at old age varies across the countries that have participated in the research process. Many older adults, especially of the rural and more isolated communities, are completely unfamiliar with the benefits of yoga, meditation and healthy living concepts. They find motivation in other much simpler, familiar and accessible activities (i.e. farming, DIY, religion, volunteering, etc.).



In the UK, all participants in the focus groups and interviews were more or less familiar with both concepts and have taken part in mindfulness activities or similar activities such as yoga. In the UK, the overall awareness of social care workers and experts working with older people is higher than in other countries. French seniors who participated in the research shared that they are familiar with mindful ageing and positive psychology tools and methods, such as meditation, yoga, and sophrology, as a way to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic and especially the lockdown.

In Bulgaria, none of the older people aged 50+ who participated in the research was aware of mindful ageing or its tools and techniques. They are also quite sceptical about introducing such techniques for contributing towards the active and successful ageing of the Bulgarian elderly. This perception stems from both a lack of awareness and the overall understanding that many older adults in Bulgaria live in poverty and cannot afford such initiatives. Identically, social workers and people working with older people in Bulgaria were more familiar with the importance of active ageing practices for the wellbeing of the elderly but were less or not familiar at all with mindful ageing tools and techniques (Mindfulness, Clinical Hypnosis, meditation and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), etc.

In Greece, older people were both unfamiliar and sceptical towards mindfulness and positive psychology techniques as tools for active and successful ageing. Similar research shows that the interest of older adults in such initiatives is quite high, especially in bigger cities and wealthier communities. In this regard, the interest depends on the pre-retirement occupation and the person's overall financial situation. In Greece, the motivation and interest towards such training and events among support workers are quite high. The experts who participated in the interviews shared that the interest of older adults in such initiatives is relatively high, especially in bigger cities and wealthier communities.

In Finland, older adults shared little awareness of mindfulness techniques. They revealed that they were more interested in physical and mental welfare by a good lifestyle. From the perspective of Finnish participants in the research, their experience showed a wealth of information related to mindfulness, nutrition and exercise for people over 50 years of age.



EXISTING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND MINDFULNESS PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICES

As part of its active ageing policy, the European Union provides support for public and private organisations to help older people stay in charge of their own lives for as long as possible as they age and, where possible, to contribute to the economy and society. In 2012, as part of the European Year for Active Ageing, the EU adopted a set of guiding principles for active ageing to serve policymakers and stakeholders at all levels to promote active ageing. A healthy lifestyle is a key to active ageing, and therefore techniques such as mindfulness, positive ageing and active lifestyle can benefit older adults both cognitively and physically. **Mindfulness** has proven to reduce depression, reduce stress, anxiety, and drug addiction treatment. There are several mindfulness practices, such as meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, tai-chi, healthy living and eating, etc. Practising mindfulness techniques reduces stress, worry, and loneliness; decreases systemic inflammation; and improves mental health, sleep, awareness, self-efficacy, cognitive functioning, and psychological well-being.



In the research that led to the development of the present report, we noticed that mindfulness and positive psychology were not very popular amongst the elderly and the social care workers we interviewed. However, specific knowledge and experience exist in some of the researched countries (i.e. Finland, France and the UK) regarding the benefits of mindfulness and positive psychology techniques for active and successful ageing. In other countries, such as Bulgaria and Greece, the overall awareness of mindful ageing and positive psychology techniques/training of those aged 50 + and social care workers that work with the elderly is very low.

The full report can be found here:

https://mindfulageing.eu/data/files/o1_fr_report_final.docx.pdf

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