

Active ageing with proper, healthy and active lifestyles:  
healthy ageing in Europe

Invecchiamento attivo con stili di vita corretti, sani e attivi:  
l'invecchiamento sano in Europa

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**ABSTRACT**

Active ageing is the process, evolution and optimizing opportunity for a healthy life of good quality, and enhances an appropriate, healthy and active lifestyle for those who age naturally, thus increasing their experience and their educational values of life. The Strategy and Action Plan for Healthy Ageing in Europe (2012-2020) provides an example and its aim is to achieve health goals. Taking into account the effective policies that go beyond the rapid demographic ageing and responding to the growing needs and expectations of the ageing population, it promotes health and social services in the field of self-care, recognizing the fundamental right of everyone to achieve a balanced health process in the various and broader spheres of the person, without distinction of age, gender, ethnicity and other differences.

Invecchiamento attivo significa processo, evoluzione ed ottimizzazione delle opportunità e delle capacità di vita e di salute, per migliorare la qualità di vita verso stili di vita corretti, sani e attivi delle persone che in maniera naturale invecchiano, accrescendo anche esperienza e valori educativi e di vita. La Strategia e il piano di azione per l'invecchiamento sano in Europa (2012-2020) è un esempio finalizzato a raggiungere gli obiettivi della salute, tenendo conto di politiche efficaci che vadano oltre il rapido invecchiamento demografico, rispondendo alle crescenti necessità e aspettative della popolazione in via di invecchiamento, verso la promozione della salute e dei servizi sanitari e sociali migliorati in maniera di self-care, riconoscendo il diritto fondamentale di ognuno di raggiungere un equilibrato processo di salute nelle varie e più ampie sfere della persona, senza distinzione di età, sesso, etnie e altre differenziazioni.

**Keywords:** ageism; proactive model; health, healthy and active lifestyles; life skills; strategies for active ageing

**Parole chiave:** ageismo; modello proattivo; salute, stili di vita sani e attivi; life skills; strategie per l'invecchiamento attivo

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## 1. Introduction

Life extension must represent an opportunity, a challenge, a social growth if the social, cultural and educational welfare is anchored more and more to the enhancement of skills, the life skills of people aging and interacting in society thanks to an intra- and intergenerational solidarity qualifying the forms of social coexistence and the quality of life itself. In fact, active ageing should also take into consideration the strategic role of the new elders being aware and responsible for their own life, health and lifestyles.

Territories, structures and infrastructures have to be modernized as well as the quality and the organization of public spaces making them tailored to and in support of the elders and the new active ones. Attention must be placed on the needs and on the potentials of the elders and not only on health facilities or on health education but on the territorial extended «welfare», integrated in the equality and diversity of potential health education resources. Society and the educating community must intervene in a «friendly ageing» way and as a welcoming- inclusive environment for all citizens and for the «active ageing».

## 2. The active aging process: beyond «ageism»

Active ageing is educating the concept of old age in a positive and proactive way. That is, according to a renewed concept of health that interprets well-being as a process in constant evolution and continuous improvement and not as a fixed and determined state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. The concept of health, is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1948) as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. It implies that the individual should be able to identify and realize his/her aspirations, satisfying needs and modifying the environment or adapting to it according to his/her abilities, skills, potentials and life skills.

Today, in fact, the concept of health which is considered by the World Health Organization (WHO), as being fixed and immutable over time, should be replaced by a more active and respectful concept of «Active Ageing». Health is the PROCESS of the well-balanced Being in the various spheres which not only include the physical, mental and social ones, but the affective, emotional, cultural spheres along with people's geographical belonging (their belonging to a geographical environment and to a psychological-affective-emotional area). So, above all, the educational sphere.

Active ageing is, therefore, education in the field of growth, in the process of evolution and improvement. Education for proactive senescence contrasts to the chronological and biological aspect of advanced ageing and passive old age and favours human development which is determined, creative, innovative, essential, active and educationally and socially rich in experiences and with values that suggest a healthy and correct lifestyle.

Categorization by age (infancy/youth/pre-adolescence and adolescence/adulthood/old age), classifies people and organizes their relationships among themselves. Classifying is a basic cognitive process that allows us to organize the world around us by reducing its complexities. It would be impossible or disadvantageous to do so without categories. Categorization is necessary but not sufficient and may develop prejudices and discrimination against an external group (Park & Judd, 2005; Bodenhausen, 2012). The concept of «Ageism» must be corrected and should overcome discrimination against old age which considers «old as a limit and the age of a decline, a loss, an absence: the end of the race» (Guillemard, 2006, p. 18). To go beyond «Ageism», we proceed towards the growth of the person, according to a process of permanent education and continuous-permanent learning (Life long Education). «Ageism» is seen as the discrimination against a person on the basis of his/her chronological and biological age of birth and does not take into consideration his/her potentials, talents, needs, aptitudes and limits. Therefore, the concept of old age as the end of life and experiences is opposed to the concept of activity and respect for life abilities which go beyond the individual's age: the life skills (WHO, 1992).

The term «Life Skills» refers to a wide range of basic cognitive, emotional and relational skills which allow people to operate with competence on individual, subjective and social levels.

«Life Skills are the skills that lead to positive behaviors and to adaptation to the surrounding environment and make the individual capable (enable) to cope effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life» (Life Skills, OMS, 1992).

In fact, the skills that can be included among the “Life Skills” are innumerable and can be classified according to culture, education and context.

Competencies can be grouped according to 3 areas:

- **EMOTIONAL**: self-awareness, emotional management, stress management.
- **Emotional competence** is the ability to identify and respond to one’s own and others’ feelings and emotional reactions. Five elements pertaining to emotional competence are identified: recognizing one’s emotions, managing and expressing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing the emotions of others and caring for relations;
- **RELATIONAL**: empathy, effective communication, effective relationships.
- **Relational and social skills** include the ability to adequately decode and interpret situations and the social context, to generate effective solutions, anticipate realistically the consequences and potential obstacles of one’s actions and translate social decisions into effective behaviors;
- **COGNITIVE**: problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, creative thinking.
- **Cognitive competence** refers to the ability to read and interpret situations, organize problem solving and decision-making processes, to recognize the perspectives of others, to have positive attitudes towards life as well as self-awareness.

Therefore, it is essential to acquire and develop life skills among adults (who no longer identify themselves as passive elders) allowing them to face the problems and needs of everyday life while leaving the working life, as a moment of “ecological transition”, based on adaptation and creative innovation in both the family and social life spheres while considering themselves as “active-elders”.

Active ageing is an educational process of lifelong education according to a proactive model for positive and proactive ageing (Kahana, Kahana, 2002). The proactive model is based on a proactive attitude to responsibility; a positive and proactive response of a person who reacts to a circumstance in a social context and decides to obtain his/her well-being by improving themselves in a responsible and independent way.

Pro activity is a proactive attitude of empowerment and the reaction depends on the self and not on an external cause.

Proactive individuals decide and react in every context, situation, and circumstance autonomously and responsibly; they obtain their goals and are aware and actively involved when achieving them.

Reactivity, on the other hand, indicates irresponsibility and the reaction does not depend on the individual but is subordinated to the external cause, not determined by the person (Kahana, Kahana, 2002; 2005).

Reactive and non-proactive people, in fact, depend on circumstances and situations. They have no control over their reactions and are influenced by external factors such as the environment, circumstances, and events. These people connote themselves as being passive and inactive individuals.

The proactive individual, on the other hand, is autonomous, responsible and behaves according to his/her own abilities in every sort of proactive environment and on the basis of belonging to that environment. . The systems defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in the Ecological Systems Theory, in relation to the distance of the individual, that is, from the closest (microsystem) to the furthest (macrosystem), constitute an example of the relationship between people and the surrounding environment.

The «proactive elderly person» gets in touch with the environment or the ecosystem starting from the «microsystem» (a restricted area close to one’s daily life), and then gradually moves on to the «mesosystem» (the area in which the person actively participates in), the «exosystem» (where the person is not actively present but acknowledges the environment and the individuals indirectly), and finally reaches up to the «macrosystem» (which include institutions, politics and their belonging to reality). These areas fall within the «chronosystem», that is, the physical and psychological space of belonging, the physical passage time, as well as the evolutionary, chronological and psychological growth (Bronfenbrenner, 2002).

Therefore, the proactive model for positive ageing places external resources, services and the social environment at the bottom level while the internal resources, the personal growth, skills, self-esteem and self-realization, at the top and orientation is always towards the future, towards a perspective continuous improvement and a lifelong education. External and internal resources undergo proactive adaptations of the environment and the systems to which they belong to (Zambianchi, Ricci Bitti, 2012).

The proactive elderly person must use and respond responsibly and autonomously to these proactive adaptations in order to live a healthy life, according to a balanced well-being process that goes beyond and does not take into account physiological and personal ageing but the positive, purposeful and successful aspects (Ryff, Singer, 2008). Old age, in fact, is an age still in full swing and made up not only of losses and shortcomings (in work, social life, etc.), but of generativity of ideas and views which encourages people to face the new “old age” in a constructive perspective way (Pinto Minerva, 2012).

### 3. From the who model for active ageing to the healthy ageing strategies in Europe

The best living conditions, the balanced well-being (in an extensive and broad sense, from the physical to the educational, emotional, social and geographical spheres), the correct, healthy and active lifestyles that intervene and are a decisive part of the life process of those who «age» in an active and proactive way, all constitute «a triumph and a challenge for our society» (WHO, 2002). To actively and proactively overcome the ageing of the population, WHO has outlined a strategic framework, the «Active Ageing», with the aim of creating and strengthening the best conditions for «active ageing». Health, Participation and the Safety of elderly people are the three “pillars” of Active Ageing. The goal is to encourage a changeover from policies that are based on the needs and requirements of elderly people who are considered passive and inactive individuals (therefore useless and non-productive), to policies that recognize each person’s rights and duties, their responsibility to be active by participating in the community life in a proactive manner including their examples, values and good life qualities too (WHO, 2002).

For healthy and active ageing, a proposal for a «Strategy and Action Plan for Healthy Ageing in Europe» (2012-2020) has been outlined. This document proposes strategic areas of action and a set of interventions in synergy with Health 2020. It is a new European policy in support of transversal actions by governments and societies dealing with health and well-being strategies.

Healthy ageing (Health 2020) concerns different aspects:

- it responds to the growing needs and expectations of ageing populations with healthpromotions and supports self-care;
- it recognizes the fundamental right of every person to achieve a balanced well-being regardless of his/her age;
- it takes into account prevention at all levels (primary, secondary, tertiary, quaternary).

The document «Strategy and Action Plan for Healthy Ageing in Europe» (2012-2020), is divided into four strategic areas of action and five priority interventions, as well as three support interventions. The action plan is designed as a guide for all Member States to develop policies aimed at active ageing after 2020.

The 2012-2020 (and after) strategy and action plan is first of all divided into four main sections:

- the first establishes the background and its context;
- the second proposes four priority strategic areas for the action depending on existing tools, services and resources:
  - **Strategic area 1: Healthy ageing throughout the life course.**  
The whole-of-life approach to healthy ageing invites people to improve the way they age by adopting healthier, more active, more correct lifestyles and adapting to the changes associated with the age and the environment. This strategy and action plan considers interventions aimed at the «beginning of old age» starting with prevention and improving one’s lifestyle.
  - **Strategic area 2: Environments good for health.**  
A supportive environment at the community level ensures a valuable contribution to the quality of life, healthy ageing, healthier lifestyles and contexts which are good for health. Physical and psychological environments are identified in a deconditioned and deconditioning environments for adult ageing.

- **Strategic area 3: Health and long-term care systems centered on the person and the ageing populations.**

It refers to systems, resources and services centered on ageing populations such as: health care, information, health education, useful interventions that are aimed at the lack of resources, health and social care for older people overcoming barriers that prevent the elderly to live their «active» life worthily and independently.

- **Strategic area 4: Strengthening research.**

It means recognizing the main gaps existing in terms of statistical data and qualitative/quantitative research in order to guide policies to support elderly populations. Investing in data so as to monitor health conditions, establishing centers of excellence for research on active and healthy aging policies and strategies and implementing programs for the prevention and management of any diseases (Strategy and Action Plan for Healthy Aging in Europe, 2012-2020).

- These four priority areas include interventions to help older people stay active for as long as possible, to protect their health and well-being and to allow them to actively participate in society.
- The third section proposes five priority interventions: 1) prevention of falls; 2) promotion of physical activity; 3) vaccination for elderly people; 4) public support for assistance; 5) strengthening of skills in the geriatric field;
- The fourth section proposes three support and prevention interventions that link healthy aging to the social context: 1) prevention against isolation and social exclusion of the elderly; 2) prevention of elder abuse; 3) strategies to ensure the quality of care for older people and long-term care.

This strategy and action plan outlines synergies and cooperation with other European partners and in particular with the initiatives of the European Commission, all aimed at the well-being of the ageing population (Plan of Action on Aging, 2002).

The existing awareness is that population ageing is spreading rapidly, making the need to prepare and organize health, social and educational strategies and systems urgent. The «old», today becomes the «late adults», the «active senior citizens», the fourth age or «silver age», due to the rich experiences and life that is still to be lived and shared (W.H.O., 2002)

The Decade of Healthy Ageing proposed by the United Nations (2020-2030) as a WHO action plan, consists of a global collaboration among sustainable development goals, governments, civil societies, international agencies, the academic world, as well as public and private sectors all aimed at improving the lives of the elderly. The Decade will address four areas of action: Age Friendly Environments, Fighting ageism, Integrated and Long term care. The Decade of Healthy Ageing aims at placing older people at the center of this action plan.

The «new elderly», in search of needs, experiences, skills, abilities and desires, constitute the social and educational scenario of our time and their life quality is no longer characterized by one's age, quantity or workplace productivity. On the other hand, it implies: preparing and designing a new itinerary of «social welfare», an active ageing with new social policies, new cities tailored to «Active Aging» and a continuous and lifelong education.

#### 4. Lifelong learning and healthy-active lifestyles

A knowledge society implies improving social welfare as well as abilities, life skills and learning opportunities and to improve the quality of educational and training systems continuously and permanently, it is also important to raise the thresholds when mastering key skills, thus cultivating «human capital», that is, those individual and social capabilities that become essential objectives for all States (Ellerani, 2013).

It is considered necessary to plan education and training systems in order to guide growth, develop cohesion, face transformations and crises, but above all, to adopt and promote healthy, correct and active lifestyles. (Ellerani, 2013).

Lifelong learning, as well as healthy, correct and active lifestyles, are considered fundamental skills both for life and the working class. They promote social, economic and political developments, and allow citizens to find their right place not only in the social and professional fields, but give them a sense of be-



longing to a family and to a geographical environment (a city made for people including elders) with healthy and active lifestyles making them «live a future active ageing» (Bruschi, Repetto, Talarico, 2022).

The constant changes of knowledge, the technological evolution and the variations social anthropological perspectives, impose a constant review and permanent updating of personal knowledge in order to live the contemporary reality in an inclusive and well-Being way (Bruschi, Repetto, Talaric, 2022).

The basic values of a new welfare is the «welfare of capabilities» which allows individuals to demand their social rights especially the right to learn and to live one's existence in balanced Well-Being. It is a question of changing from the generic recognition of the right to learning that takes shape throughout life, to a system of recognition and certification of skills that ensures the person's access and participation as an active citizen. The individual must be accompanied in this evolutionary path centered on capability with a view to lifelong education (Bruschi, Repetto, Talarico, 2022).

The individual is always at the center of the learning process which requires a constant willingness to learn without age and to actively build skills in relation to the demands of the circumstances.

According to the European Council, the «key competences for lifelong learning» (European Key Competences, 2018), are useful not only for personal fulfillment and development, but for social inclusion, sustainable lifestyles and to control life by acknowledging the importance of health and active citizenship. Learning in all moments of life also means learning in all factors of life. Knowledge is built and enriched in daily life, in families, in communities and in societies.

Lifelong learning to stimulate in adults (learning individuals) a sense of self-efficiency, self-efficacy, autonomy and responsibility of increasing the sense of competence and confidence in one's own abilities and possibilities.

Lifelong Learning, in view of people's wellness, leads the ageing individual to an «Active Ageing». «Active aging is seen as the common thread that intertwines wisdom with the possibility of learning and changing in all of life» (Amoretti, Spulber, Varani, 2017).

An adult is an individual who has not only within him/herself generativity (knowing how to generate ideas and prospects for innovation) but knows how to take care (of himself, of others, of the environment, of rules and roles), and to socialize (communicating with empathy, sense and meaning). These are human characteristics and categories that are increasingly present in the elderly and active individuals. The new elderly person is who knows how to create, to make him/herself available to others by communicating in an empathic way (De Natale, 2014).

Active aging and intra- intergenerational solidarity lead older people to volunteering. They engage in activities aimed at helping people in need such as personal services, health services, health information, recreational-cultural activities, etc. Intra and intergenerational volunteering highlights a strong sensitivity of Active Ageing towards one's own generation and the problems associated with ageing (Kovacs, Black, 1999). Active longevity thanks to volunteering and where the third/fourth age is the active protagonist according to continuous permanent training and a civic social commitment.

Therefore, it means reconsidering and rethinking of old age in a constructive sense. Facing the new age in a constructive proactive way with the recategorization of old age towards an interpretation of quality and perspective. Planning old age with what is preserved as experience can even be increased over the years (Ladogana, 2016).

## 5. Conclusions

Pedagogy is faced with a challenge that is not only economic and social but above all, planned, cultural and educational. Redesigning a new Welfare means: outlining strategies, making environments more suitable for active ageing, directing lifelong education «policies», encouraging elderly people to remain active and their contribution to society also through volunteering. Thanks to the «best practices», that is, the skills and competences of the elderly who are no longer considered passive and inactive old people, but protagonists of life stories in the process of permanent education towards an active, positive and proactive ageing.

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