

Leisure Activities

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Many studies in the past few decades have examined how participation in leisure activities, such as playing a musical instrument, gardening, and reading the newspaper, can positively influence the aging process. For instance, studies have found an association between leisure activities and a reduced risk of amnesic mild cognitive impairment, dementia, and/or Alzheimer's disease. In addition to positive cognitive outcomes, leisure activities also have been associated with a variety of other benefits, such as improved quality of life, mental health, life satisfaction, self-reports of happiness, and overall well-being. This entry provides a brief overview of the definition of leisure activities, theories for why they are useful especially in old age, and limits of leisure activity research.

Since past research suggests that leisure activities may be useful for improving overall health, it is important to understand what exactly leisure activities entail and which activities may be more effective than others. For many studies, leisure activities have included physical, cognitive, and social activities that range in level of complexity and difficulty. Cognitive activities generally include reading, group discussions, and playing musical instruments. Conversely, less stimulating cognitive activities, such as television watching, are not as beneficial. In fact, an association was found between higher levels of television watching and an increased risk of mild cognitive impairment. Physical activities have ranged from dancing to playing golf to even babysitting. Studies have found that frequent participation in more vigorous physical leisure activities, defined as activities more intense than walking, serve as a buffer against age-related decline. Another study discovered that among those with lower mortality

rates, they also had higher levels of physical activity (e.g., walking or swimming). Interestingly, similar results were found among those who displayed increased engagement in social activities, which included church attendance and participation in social groups. Among other research investigating the effects of social engagement (e.g., attending the cinema), findings showed a lower risk of dementia. Many studies also have showcased the effectiveness of simultaneously engaging in more than one type of leisure activity. In a study examining the effects of social, physical, and mental activities among Swedish participants 75 years of age and older, results suggested that reducing the risk of dementia was optimized when there was heightened involvement in two or all three types of activities. Results from another study among the oldest-old (77 to 98 years of age) in Sweden suggested that higher levels of participation in leisure activities in general (ranging from cultural to recreational activities) may lead to better social and physical outcomes.

There are several theories to explain why and how participation in leisure activities promotes healthy aging. The theory on cognitive reserve was developed by Dr. Yakov Stern. Cognitive reserve is the phenomenon whereby stimulating environmental factors (such as engagement in leisure activities) buffers against dementia pathology, brain injuries, and the like from affecting the brain structure and cognitive functioning. Another theory on substantive complexity promotes constant participation in mentally complex activities, allowing individuals opportunities to continuously exercise their cognitive abilities in novel ways and in different contexts. Doing so essentially keeps such cognitive abilities “sharp” and prevents cognitive decline. A third theory, developed is often referred to as "use it or lose it." This theory argues that cognitive abilities that are exercised are maintained, and others that are not used often wither away. Overall, while these theories are centered on the exercise and stimulation of cognitive

abilities, they each provide a different explanation for why leisure activities reduce cognitive decline.

As exciting as research on leisure activities is for aging adults, it is also important to discuss potential limitations. First, leisure activities typically are not very well defined. For instance, many researchers may differ in what they consider a leisure activity. Many also have difficulty in classifying activities into one category (i.e., social, cognitive, or physical), because activities can, to different extents, have overlapping attributes. Second, there is not a standard way to determine whether an activity is or is not challenging, which could increase or decrease the possibility of obtaining more positive outcomes. Finally, leisure activities are closely linked to lifelong learning, which means that lifelong engagement, rather than leisure activities per se, may be the main contributor to better aging outcomes. These limitations may explain some inconsistencies in studies on the benefits of leisure activities.

In sum, despite limitations regarding research on leisure activities, there are still many studies that provide support for the positive role of leisure activities in inducing better aging outcomes.

Further reading

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Hultsch, D. F., Hertzog, C., Small, B. J., & Dixon, R. A. (1999). Use it or lose it: engaged lifestyle as a buffer of cognitive decline in aging? *Psychology and aging*, 14(2), 245.

Stern, Y. (2009). Cognitive reserve. *Neuropsychologia*, 47(10), 2015-2028.