

SUMMARY REPORT

Enjoying life in late adulthood



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Introduction

The proportion of older adults in western societies is increasing at a high pace. These individuals still have many productive years ahead of them, and even when they face health or functional challenges, many of them retain a high satisfaction with life. Their wellbeing and valuation of life is strongly related to what they do on a daily basis^{1 2}. Studies^{3 4} find that the following factors play a major role for older adults' quality of life:

- (1) social relations,
- (2) safe and pleasant neighbourhood,
- (3) quality transportation,
- (4) solo hobbies and leisure activities, and
- (5) social and community activities.



To summarize, **positive everyday experiences are essential for enjoying late adulthood.**

DEXSAGE stands for Daily Experiences of Successful Ageing. It is an EU-funded research project that investigated the relationship between the things that older adults do during the day and their stress levels, the enjoyment they derived from daily life, and their overall subjective wellbeing.

This leaflet summarizes the findings of the study and provides recommendations regarding the little things that older (and younger) adults can do to improve their overall wellbeing.

¹ Moss, M., S., Hoffman, Ch., J., Mossey, J., Rovine, M. (2007). Changes Over 4 Years in Health, Quality of Life, Mental Health, and Valuation of Life. *Journal of Ageing & Health* 19(6), 1025-1044.

² Lawton, M. P., Moss, M., Hoffman, C., Grant, R., Ten Have, T., & Kleban, M. H. (1999). Health, valuation of life, and the wish to live. *The Gerontologist*, 39, 406-416.

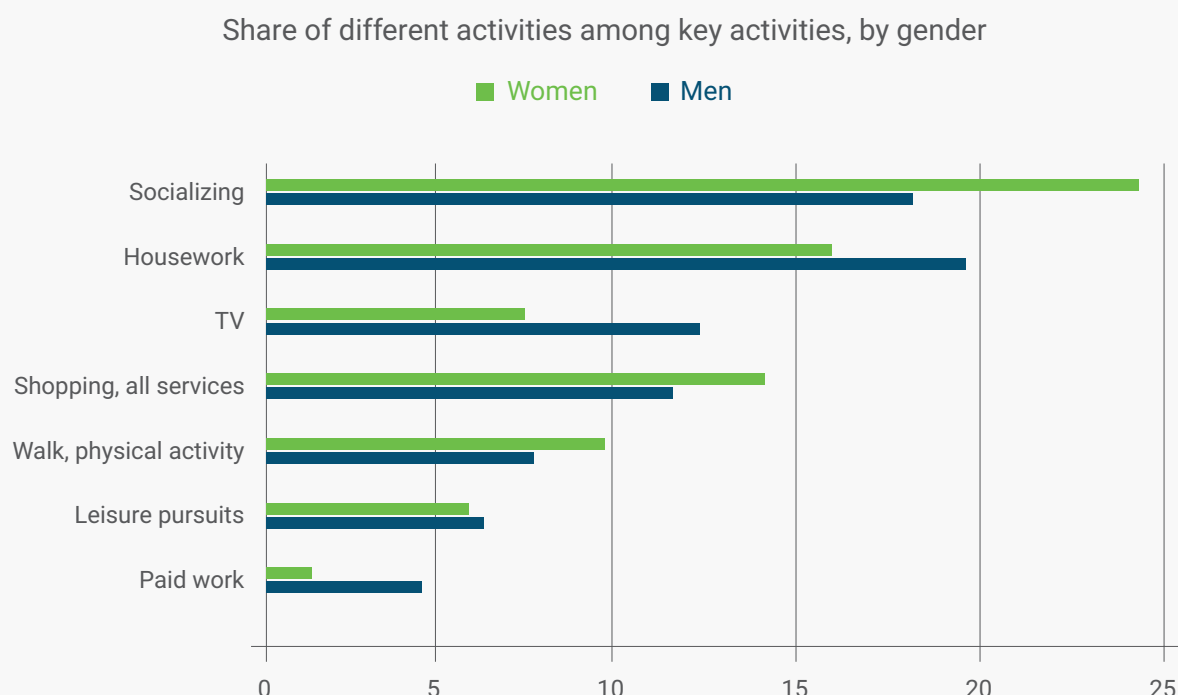
³ Cosco, T. D., Prina, A. M., Perales, J., Stephan, B. C. M., & Brayne, C. (2013b). Operational definitions of successful aging: A systematic review. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 26, 1-9.

⁴ Bowling, A., & Dieppe, P. (2005). What is successful ageing and who should define it? *British Medical Journal*, 331, 1548-1551.

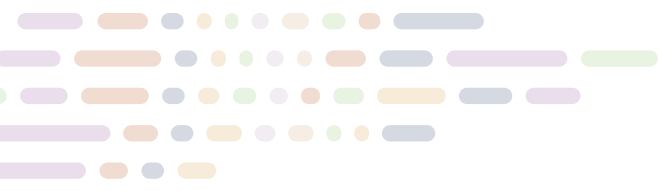
Findings of the study

Men and women differ not only with regard to what they do on a daily basis, but also in terms of what those activities mean for them.

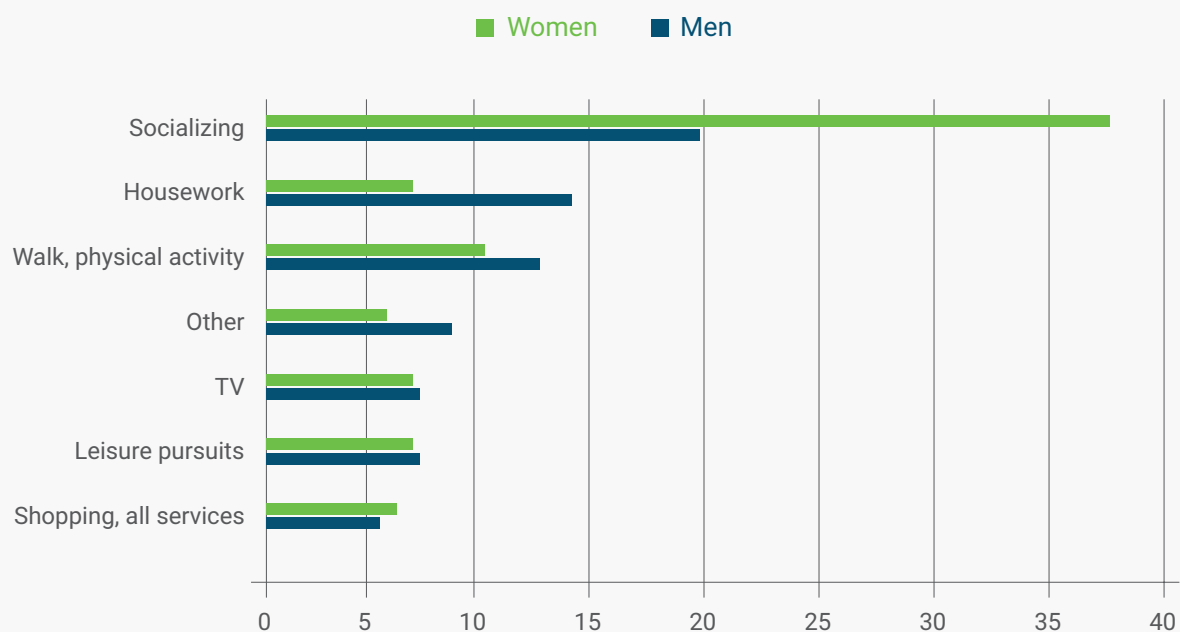
Below we present a list of five (seven) activities that were reported as the most important activity of the day for either gender. Women are more socially-oriented, whereas men are more likely to structure their days based on the so-called instrumental activities, such as housework.



The activities that were seen as giving the greatest boost to older adults' wellbeing were socializing, housework and physical activity. Women were more likely to report socializing as their 'best' activity of the day, whereas men were more likely than women to see physical activity as such. The category of 'other activities' included random events such as going for holidays or an unexpected positive surprise. Each event was recorded and reported on the exact same day it occurred, therefore, providing an accurate reflection on the real-life experiences.



Share of different activities among best activities of the day, by gender



Except for gender, which is one of the main differentiating criteria, what older adults do or enjoy during the day is also dependent upon their health, place of residence (urban or rural), family situation and psychological traits. However, even when these factors are accounted for, some universal dispositions emerge.

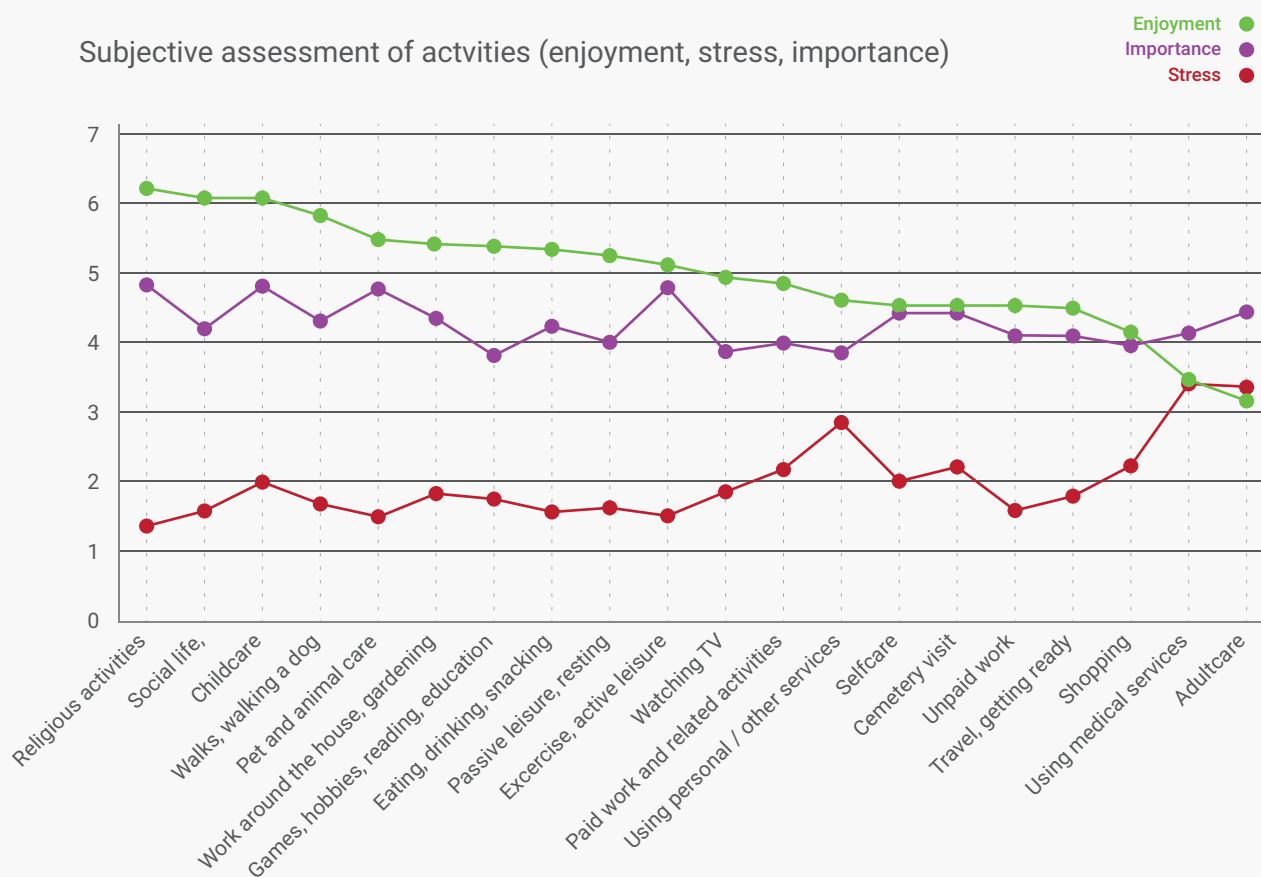
Some experiences were clearly associated with mental health benefits, including higher derived enjoyment or lower stress levels. This positive mental state was linked to 1. What individuals did, 2. Who accompanied them, 3. Where they were, and 4. How much effort they put into a given activity. Below we present the overview of these findings.

1/ Connectedness with friends and family, nature, and the spiritual side of life

Older adults equally enjoyed spiritual activities, socializing, caring for their grandchildren, walks including walking the dog, and caring for animals. These activities were also associated with lower-than-average stress levels – with the exception of childcare.



Subjective assessment of activities (enjoyment, stress, importance)



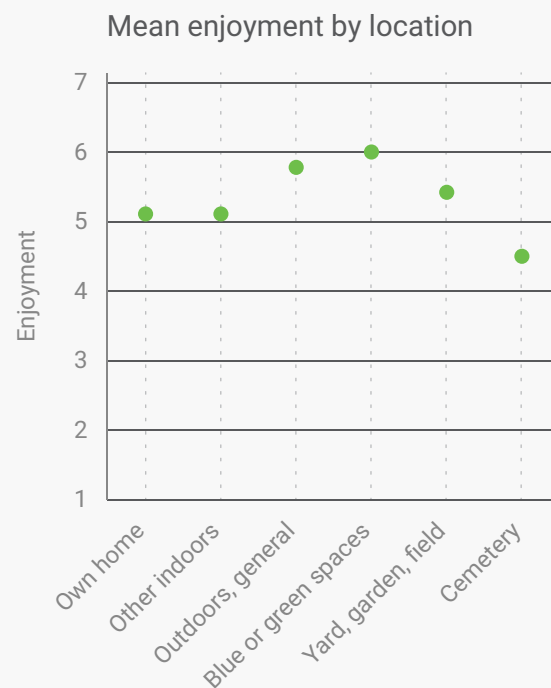
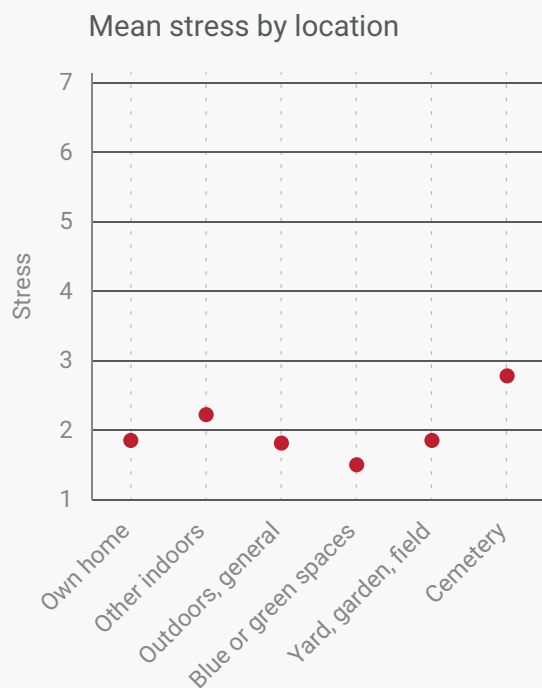
2/ Presence of friends

Regardless of what they did, the older adults enjoyed the given activity more if they were **with a friend** which also included a neighbour. Being **with a family member** was also associated with greater enjoyment compared to solitary activities.




3/ Seeing life in green

Going outside means many things –a walk to the shops, participating in religious activities, or time spent around the house and cultivating the garden. All of these activities are beneficial - they increase physical activity and improve overall functioning. However, direct contact with nature stands out in terms of the mental health benefits it brings. Spending time in green or blue spaces – such as in parks, forests, or by rivers and lakes – has been associated with the greatest enjoyment and lowest stress in this study as well as earlier research⁵.



⁵ Finlay, J., Franke, T., McKay, H., & Sims-Gould, J. (2015). Therapeutic landscapes and wellbeing in later life: Impacts of blue and green spaces for older adults. *Health & place*, 34, 97-106.



Blue or green spaces are also more likely to be reported as the location of the 'best' activity of a day.

4/ Balancing effortful and effortless activities

Older adults derive more enjoyment from activities that involve both the highest and lowest levels of effort⁶. Similar findings were reported in an earlier study conducted in the Netherlands⁷. The effortful activity can be any that is physically or intellectually demanding – examples from our study included fixing broken things, teaching a child to clean, but also making a bank transfer online. Demanding activities should be balanced by restful ones – the most common low-effort activity in our study was watching TV.



⁶ Jarosz, E. (2021). What makes life enjoyable at an older age? Experiential wellbeing, daily activities, and satisfaction with life in general, *Aging & Mental Health*, online first.

⁷ Oerlemans, W. G. M., Bakker, A. B., & Veenhoven, R. (2011). Finding the key to happy aging: A day reconstruction study of happiness. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 66B(6), 665–674.

How to brighten up a day?

It is not uncommon for older adults to struggle with mental health issues including low mood, anxiety, and even depression⁸. Serious issues such as depression require medical treatment to feel better, but in many other cases there are easy ways to effectively improve your mood and boost overall wellbeing.

What can you do to feel better?

- 1/** Spend time with friends, neighbours or people whose company you enjoy – and make it a priority. Socializing improves wellbeing, and attaching a lot of importance to it provides an additional boost.
- 2/** Find a personal project that will motivate and challenge you. It can be anything from home improvement and gardening to self-learning, developing your computing skills or painting. Pick something you are able to do, but that also requires effort. Overcoming your boundaries and not steering clear of challenging things is good for your mental health and will bring you much satisfaction.
- 3/** Take a rest when you need it. Studies suggest that balancing demanding (including cognitively challenging) and restful activities may improve wellbeing in older adults. Rest may involve reading, listening to music or watching TV – preferably not the news because watching the news has been associated with elevated stress levels, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4/** Have a stroll in a green area to boost physical activity levels and destress. Proximity of trees, grassland or water (the sea, lakes or rivers) has been associated with better mental health in older adults. Direct exposure to green areas lowers stress and improves overall wellbeing.
- 5/** If you have a spiritual practice of any sort this is likely to lift you up too. Numerous studies have pointed to the benefits of spiritual connectedness and prayers for older adults' overall wellbeing⁹, including for frail individuals with multiple health conditions¹⁰.



⁸ Fiske, A., Wetherell, J. L., & Gatz, M. (2009). Depression in older adults. *Annual review of clinical psychology*, 5, 363-389.

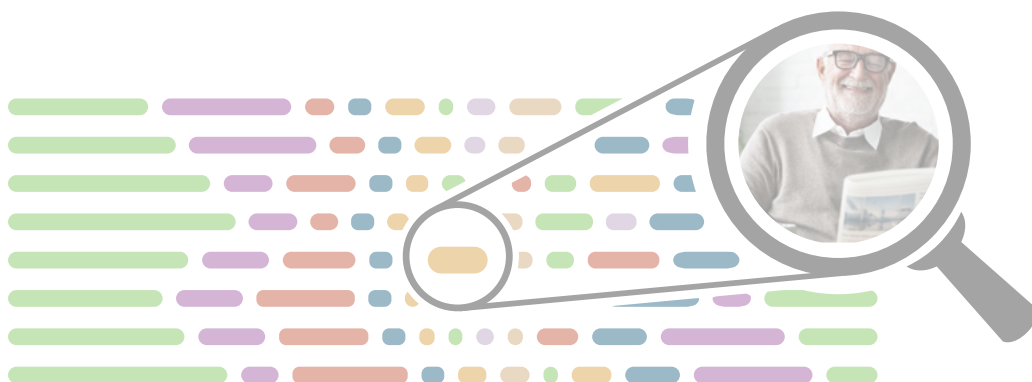
⁹ Lawler-Row, K. A., & Elliott, J. (2009). The Role of Religious Activity and Spirituality in the Health and Well-being of Older Adults. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 14(1), 43–52.

¹⁰ Kirby, S. E., Coleman, P. G., Daley, D. (2004) Spirituality and Well-Being in Frail and Nonfrail Older Adults, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 59 (3), 123–129.

Study methodology and technical note

The data was collected at the beginning of 2020 on a sample of 200 Polish older adults living independently. The sampling frame used quota for gender and age, as well as the size of the place of residence. Respondents were randomly sampled. The study used the experience sampling method which means that older adults were called at random times over the day and asked what they were doing at that time and how they felt about it. Respondents provided in total 1809 activity reports. On top of that, each participant of the study filled in an end-of-the-day report in which they reported on what they felt was the most important, the best or the worst activity on a given day. Overall, a huge variety of 400 most important activities were reported, alongside over 600 best or worst activities, the majority of which were labelled 'the best.'

The study was carried out by Dr Ewa Jarosz (SYNYO, Vienna) and received ethical clearance from the University of Warsaw Rector's Committee for the Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants (ethics approval number: 44/2019).



DEXSAGE

Daily Experiences of Successful Ageing



PROJECT FACTS

DURATION

08 / 2019 - 07 / 2021

COUNTRIES

Austria & Poland

Number of Respondents

200

Recorded Activity Episodes

nearly 3000

Data Collection Technique

Experience Sampling Method (ESM)

End-of-the-day reports

Survey questionnaire

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