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How to Enhance the Social Inclusion in Older Adults: A Practical Inventory Based on an Ecological Model

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Introduction

There are a number of interventions that can promote the social inclusion, or reduce the risk of exclusion, of older people. Interventions may be formal (e.g. rehabilitation therapy) or informal (e.g. social visits) and are provided by various resources that facilitate the social inclusion of older people. The full range of interventions can be considered from the perspective of an ecological systems model, which represents the interaction between numerous interconnected factors that overlap and impact one another. Viewed in this way, social inclusion is the product of the interactions between an individual's biological and personal characteristics (ontosystem), the characteristics of significant people in the individual's immediate environment (microsystem), the multiple characteristics of the surrounding environment in which the individual and their family live (Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem) and temporal factors (Chronosystem). This model enables us to view an older adult as an individual who is included in a system of significant relationships with their family and the world they live in, as well as with local and regional organisations in their community [1]. From this point of view, a person's social environment has genuine potential to be a network of support and mutual assistance, contributing to the individual's sense of self and, potentially, to their quality of life. Completing the cycle, older people also play a role in transforming their environment and therefore in transforming themselves in the process.

Interventions in the Ontosystem and the Microsystem

To work in favour of social inclusion, any individual intervention needs to take into account an older person's resources (onto system) and those of their immediate environment (microsystem). It is important to work in partnership with the older person and significant people in their lives (family, friends etc.), not to mention other clinicians. The attitude, resources and support provided by an older person's immediate environment has a direct effect on their level of social inclusion. Interventions may also be directed at optimising an individual's capacity to make the most of opportunities to increase their own level of social inclusion. In this context, there are things that can be done to improve an older person's physical, cognitive, psychological and social capacity (e.g. improving awareness of opportunities for social inclusion, capacity to build and maintain social connections), to create a safe and properly adapted physical environment (e.g. making the home accessible to wheelchair), or to modify common social activities (e.g. adapting an activity to allow participation while seated rather than standing). For these interventions to be effective, it is essential not only that a structured therapeutic approach be taken to get the clearest possible sense of individual motivation and develop a tailored activity plan, but also that

the activities be done in stages and repeated on a regular basis. The resources available in the surrounding area may also serve to improve the social inclusion of older people and their families – for instance by providing access to a wider range of leisure activities and services, or by facilitating participation in public cultural events.

Interventions in the Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem

To support greater social inclusion for older people, it is essential for service providers and decision-makers to work in an interdisciplinary manner with their colleagues and other network partners. This first requires training in social inclusion and its determinants to enable participation in intersectoral actions, policy development and research on social inclusion. There are interventions that can support interactions within and between generations, especially for vulnerable and marginal groups. In much the same way as their immediate environment, the attitude, resources and support offered by an older person's wider community or society also has an effect on their level of social inclusion. The connections formed, measures implemented and decisions made by various systems have an impact on a person's level of social inclusion, even if the individual is not directly involved in the interactions between these microsystems. It is essential that structures and institutional rules do not contribute to social exclusion by allocating resources or opportunities unfairly, by forming inadequate cognitive and normative repertoires, or by failing to provide older people with the necessary support to express themselves and make choices. Concerted efforts to motivate and encourage older people to participate according to their needs and preferences can make the difference between social inclusion and social isolation. In this vein, the age-friendly cities project encourages the creation and adaptation of accessible environments to improve security, mobility, transport and inclusion [2].

In short, there are numerous interventions within the various sub-systems of the ecological systems model that can support social inclusion. Many social and organisational factors need to be taken into account to promote the social inclusion of older people [3]. Not all older people are in the same circumstances or have the same opportunities or aspirations with regard to social inclusion. To intervene in a manner that supports social inclusion, it is important to act on individuals and their social and organisational environments. In other words, while individual realities and attitudes are crucial, to implement lasting and meaningful change, it is not possible to act solely at the individual level without reviewing certain aspects of organisations or paying attention to certain societal factors. It is also important to emphasise that social inclusion cannot be reduced to a "simple" outcome of social arrangements, nor to the interaction

between such arrangements and the psychological characteristics of individuals; rather, social inclusion is the result of the constructive actions of individuals having to deal with the circumstances they encounter. Finally, if emphasis is to be placed on public policies aimed at promoting the social inclusion of older people, in practice such policies are rare and uncoordinated [3].

References

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