

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PURPOSE IN LIFE IN OLDER ADULTS: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

RELAÇÃO ENTRE ATIVIDADE FÍSICA E PROPÓSITO DE VIDA EM PESSOAS IDOSAS: UMA REVISÃO NARRATIVA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Human aging is a natural, physiological, and psychosocial process that can impair functional capacity and autonomy. Regular physical activity is recognized as a key factor for maintaining physical and mental health, as well as promoting independence and quality of life. In parallel, purpose in life has been associated with greater resilience, social engagement, and well-being in older adults. **Objective:** This narrative review aimed to analyze the relationship between physical activity and purpose in life in older adults, considering functional, psychological, and social aspects. **Methods:** Studies published in Portuguese and English, without time restrictions, were included and retrieved from various academic databases and platforms. **Results:** The analysis showed that physical activity improves strength, balance, mobility, cognition, and social interaction, while purpose in life acts as a motivational factor for adherence to and maintenance of active behaviors. The relationship is bidirectional: exercise fosters the development and maintenance of meaningful goals, which in turn encourage regular physical activity. **Conclusion:** It is concluded that integrated strategies, addressing both physical and psychosocial components, should be prioritized by professionals and public policies to promote healthy and active aging.

Keywords: Physical activity. Subjective well-being. Older adults.

RESUMO

Introdução: O envelhecimento humano é um processo natural, fisiológico e psicossocial que pode comprometer a capacidade funcional e a autonomia. A prática regular de atividade física é reconhecida como fator essencial para a manutenção da saúde física e mental, além de favorecer a independência e a qualidade de vida. Paralelamente, o propósito de vida tem sido associado a maior resiliência, engajamento social e bem-estar em idosos. **Objetivo:** Esta revisão narrativa teve como objetivo analisar a relação entre atividade física e propósito de vida em pessoas idosas, considerando aspectos funcionais, psicológicos e sociais. **Métodos:** Foram incluídos estudos publicados em português e inglês, sem restrição de data, obtidos em diferentes bases de dados e plataformas acadêmicas. **Resultados:** A análise evidenciou que a atividade física melhora força, equilíbrio, mobilidade, cognição e interação social, enquanto o propósito de vida atua como fator motivacional para a adesão e manutenção de comportamentos ativos. A relação é bidirecional: o exercício favorece a construção e manutenção de metas significativas, e estas, por sua vez, estimulam a prática regular de atividades físicas. **Conclusão:** Conclui-se que estratégias integradas, contemplando componentes físicos e psicossociais, devem ser priorizadas por profissionais e políticas públicas para promover um envelhecimento saudável e ativo.

Descritores: Atividade física. Bem-estar subjetivo. Idoso.

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INTRODUCTION

Human aging is a natural, physiological, psychosocial, and progressive process, marked by a decline in cellular renewal capacity and other biological components. These changes can lead to functional impairments, particularly affecting independence and adaptation to the environment, thereby increasing vulnerability to disease^{1,2}. Functional capacity is closely linked to the ability to perform daily activities independently, including basic activities of daily living (BADL) - such as personal care, hygiene, bathing, and feeding - and instrumental activities of daily living (IADL), which require cognitive skills, such as managing medications, finances, and transportation. Advanced activities of daily living, involving work, social participation, and religious engagement, reflect higher-level functional and social integration^{3,4}.

Regular physical activity plays a central role in preserving both functional and cognitive autonomy in older adults. Evidence shows that it reduces fall risk, promotes independence, and enhances quality of life⁵. However, in Brazil, adherence to moderate-intensity leisure-time physical activity remains lower among older adults compared to other age groups. Barriers include safety concerns, pain, fear of falling, and discomfort associated with exercise⁶. This limited engagement is not only a health concern but also an economic one: according to the World Health Organization, physical inactivity generates billions of dollars annually in avoidable healthcare costs worldwide, burdening public health systems and reducing productivity⁷. The combination of physical inactivity and unhealthy dietary patterns has been strongly associated with the growing incidence of chronic diseases in this population, often resulting in physical frailty, reduced confidence in mobility, and lack of guidance or encouragement from family, community, and healthcare professionals⁸. As noted by Forman et al.⁹, a healthy older adult is not necessarily free of morbidity, but is one who actively participates in society and maintains functional capacity.

Beyond physical health, psychological and existential dimensions - particularly purpose in life - are increasingly recognized as determinants of well-being in older age. Purpose in life can be defined as the extent to which individuals perceive their lives as having meaning, direction, and intentionality, encompassing long-term goals that organize behavior and sustain motivation, even in the face of adversity¹⁰⁻¹². Importantly, purpose in life is not only an outcome of well-being but also a behavioral driver: older adults with a strong sense of purpose are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors, including maintaining regular physical activity, adhering to rehabilitation programs, and participating in community life^{13,14}. In turn, involvement in meaningful physical activities - whether individual or group-based - can reinforce a sense of purpose, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits physical, cognitive, and emotional health.

Despite a growing body of evidence linking physical activity to physical and cognitive outcomes in older adults, fewer studies have examined its relationship with purpose in life. Understanding this connection may inform holistic approaches that integrate physical health promotion with psychological well-being. Therefore, this narrative review aims to synthesize current knowledge on the relationship between physical activity and purpose in life in older adults, highlighting potential mechanisms, health and social benefits, and practical implications for designing interventions that address both domains.

METHODS

This study is a narrative literature review aimed at synthesizing existing evidence on the relationship between physical activity and purpose in life in older adults. The narrative review approach was chosen to allow a broad and integrative examination of the topic, encompassing diverse methodological designs and theoretical perspectives, without the strict inclusion criteria typically applied in systematic reviews.

No restrictions were placed on the year of publication, in order to capture both foundational studies and recent advances in the field. Articles were included if published in Portuguese or English and available in full text through academic databases and open-access repositories. The search was conducted across multiple platforms, including SciELO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories, to ensure comprehensive coverage. Keywords and combinations thereof included: “physical activity”, “exercise”, “older adults”, “elderly”, “purpose in life”, and “meaning in life”. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine search results.

Studies were eligible if they addressed:

- The practice of physical activity or exercise in individuals aged 60 years and over.
- The concept of purpose in life, meaning in life, or closely related constructs.
- The relationship between these two variables, either directly or indirectly.
- Studies focusing exclusively on clinical interventions for acute conditions, or that did not provide clear information about either variable of interest, were excluded.

The screening process involved two stages. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to identify potentially relevant studies. Second, the full text of selected articles was read to confirm eligibility based on the inclusion criteria. Reference lists of the included studies were also examined to identify additional relevant publications.

For each included study, key information was extracted, including authorship, year of publication, study design, sample characteristics, main findings, and relevance to the review objective. The analysis was conducted descriptively, grouping findings into thematic categories:

- Physical and functional benefits of physical activity in older adults.
- Psychological outcomes, including well-being, mood, and cognitive function.
- Influence of purpose in life on active aging.
- Interactions between physical activity and purpose in life.

The synthesis sought to highlight convergences and divergences among studies, identify gaps in the literature, and propose directions for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the World Health Organization⁷, functional abilities are central to healthy aging, as they sustain both physical and mental health throughout the life course. A supportive physical and social environment, combined with healthy behaviors, helps preserve functional capacity, prolong independence, and prevent frailty¹⁵. In Brazil, the Physical

Activity Guide for the Brazilian Population¹⁶ reinforces these findings, reporting that regular physical exercise can improve sleep quality and self-esteem, reduce the prevalence of chronic diseases, increase autonomy and independence, and promote human development and overall well-being. From a societal perspective, the economic burden of physical inactivity is substantial, with recent estimates indicating billions in annual healthcare costs globally - driven by increased hospitalizations, medication use, and long-term care needs in physically inactive older adults¹⁷.

Given this scenario, physical activity represents both a protective and therapeutic resource in the aging process¹⁸. In older adults with depression, regular exercise improves body image, mood, and cognitive function, while reducing physiological stress responses. Physically active individuals also exhibit a lower prevalence of mental disorders and a reduced risk of dementia¹⁹. Conversely, declines in self-esteem and increases in depressive symptoms - common in later life - are often associated with physiological deterioration, loss of social roles, bereavement, and changes in physical appearance²⁰. In this context, physical activity has proven to be an effective non-pharmacological strategy for preventing and managing psychological disorders, while enhancing positive self-perception and emotional well-being²¹.

On the other hand, physical inactivity can impair motor skills, concentration, coordination, and reaction time, which may lead to self-devaluation, apathy, social isolation, loneliness, and insecurity. These adverse outcomes not only accelerate functional decline but also increase the risk of dependency. Incorporating physical exercise into daily routines is therefore essential for enabling older adults to adapt to the physical and psychosocial changes brought by aging, maintain autonomy, and retain control over their abilities^{22,23}. Crucially, sustaining this autonomy and control may also reinforce one's sense of purpose in life - a psychological construct increasingly recognized as a key motivator for continued engagement in physical activity and active participation in society¹².

Purpose in life as a driver and outcome of physical activity

Purpose in life, classically defined as the perception that one's existence has meaning, direction, and goals that organize and guide behavior¹⁰, has gained increasing attention in the context of aging. It encompasses a motivational dimension that supports resilience, fosters engagement in social and personal projects, and sustains autonomy, even in the presence of chronic conditions or functional limitations. In older adults, a strong sense of purpose has been associated with lower mortality rates, reduced incidence of disability, better cognitive performance, and greater emotional well-being^{13, 14, 24}.

From a theoretical standpoint, frameworks such as the Self-Determination Theory²⁵ help explain these associations: purpose of life aligns with the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn enhance intrinsic motivation for health-promoting behaviors, including regular physical activity. This suggests a bidirectional relationship - purpose can act as both a determinant and a consequence of active lifestyles.

On one hand, older adults with clear, meaningful goals are more likely to adopt and maintain exercise routines, as they perceive physical activity not merely as a health recommendation, but as a tool to sustain their capacity to fulfill valued roles - such as caring for family, participating in community projects, or pursuing hobbies¹¹. On the other hand, engaging in structured and meaningful physical activities can strengthen a sense of purpose by providing opportunities for skill mastery, social bonding, and

personal achievement. Regular, guided exercise programs - three or more times per week - have been shown to foster motivation, create a sense of accomplishment, and expand social networks, all of which reinforce life meaning²⁶.

Cultural and social engagement further enhance this synergy. Participation in community events, artistic programs, or intergenerational initiatives not only supports physical and cognitive health, but also reinforces identity, belonging, and perceived societal contribution - elements that are central to purpose in life^{27,28}. Such activities can reduce chronic pain, anxiety, agitation, and feelings of loneliness, while stimulating cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation, thus contributing to a holistic sense of well-being.

In this integrative perspective, purpose in life operates both as a driver - motivating sustained adherence to physical activity - and as an outcome - emerging from the physical, cognitive, and social benefits that exercise provides. This reciprocal relationship underscores the need for health promotion strategies that go beyond physical conditioning to also incorporate elements that cultivate meaning, personal goals, and social contribution in later life.

Functional and social implications

Evidence consistently shows that promoting autonomy, dignity, and freedom of choice for older adults is crucial to ensuring quality of life²⁹. Regular physical activity improves functional performance and reduces the risk of capacity loss in frail individuals, generating not only individual health gains but also substantial public health and economic benefits³⁰. In Brazil, older adults account for approximately 26% of hospital expenditures³¹, while globally, physical inactivity is estimated to cost health systems nearly US\$ 27 billion annually⁷. From a physical perspective, staying active strengthens muscles and bones, improves mobility, memory, balance, endurance, and coordination³². These physiological benefits translate directly into greater competence in daily tasks - such as climbing stairs, sitting and standing, or carrying objects - while reducing fall and fracture risk³².

Socially, exercise fosters interpersonal interaction, builds friendship networks, and reduces loneliness³³. These social connections may also indirectly reinforce purpose in life, as meaningful relationships are recognized as core contributors to a sense of belonging and motivation to remain active³⁴. Understanding the barriers and facilitators to exercise - ranging from environmental safety and accessibility to personal motivation - is essential for designing programs that enhance adherence and sustainability³⁵. In this context, creating exercise environments that satisfy older adults' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as outlined in the Self-Determination Theory, may be crucial for sustaining engagement²⁵.

Integration of roles, activities, and purpose

Social roles strongly shape the aging experience. Employment is considered important by 93% of older adults, although this figure drops to 60% over time, often due to physical limitations or retirement²⁸. Domestic work remains valued by 83%, as it provides a sense of belonging, independence, and self-care, but may also create overburden - particularly for women facing double workloads. When these roles diminish, engagement in leisure, volunteering, and family activities can play a compensatory role, supporting well-being and helping maintain both cognitive and functional abilities²⁸.

Purpose in life can act as a unifying thread that links these roles, physical activity, and health outcomes, serving as both a motivator and a product of active living^{12,34}. Programs that integrate functional exercise with opportunities for meaningful social participation - such as community service, intergenerational projects, or skill-sharing groups - may therefore address both physical and psychosocial domains, leading to sustained engagement and greater life satisfaction. By reinforcing autonomy, competence, and social connectedness²⁵, such approaches not only promote health but also help older adults maintain a clear sense of purpose, even as their social roles evolve.

Implications for practice and policy

From a practical perspective, the evidence suggests that exercise programs for older adults should go beyond physical conditioning to incorporate elements that strengthen purpose in life - such as goal-setting workshops, community engagement projects, and intergenerational activities (LIM et al., 2024). Health professionals, including physiotherapists, physical educators, and gerontologists, should work collaboratively to deliver interventions that integrate functional training with opportunities for social and personal growth.

At the policy level, urban planning and public health strategies should prioritize safe and accessible environments for physical activity, funding for community centers, and initiatives that promote both active lifestyles and meaningful engagement. Such integrated approaches have the potential not only to improve individual well-being but also to reduce healthcare costs by preventing disability and promoting independence.

Limitations

This review has certain limitations that must be acknowledged. As a narrative review, it does not follow a standardized protocol for literature selection and is therefore more susceptible to selection bias, since the inclusion of studies was based on the authors' subjective assessment of relevance. Although the search strategy was broad and inclusive, it was not limited to specific databases nor did it include a formal quality appraisal of the selected studies, which may have led to the

omission of relevant evidence or the inclusion of research with methodological weaknesses.

Additionally, the heterogeneity in study designs, populations, and outcome measures precluded direct comparison of results and limited the ability to establish causal relationships. Most of the included literature was based on cross-sectional or observational designs, which restricts the capacity to determine temporal links between physical activity and purpose in life in older adults.

CONCLUSION

This narrative review highlights consistent evidence that physical activity plays a crucial role in promoting both functional capacity and psychological well-being in older adults, with purpose in life emerging as a key factor that can enhance the benefits of an active lifestyle. Regular engagement in physical exercise is associated not only with improvements in mobility, balance, strength, and cognitive function, but also with greater resilience, life satisfaction, and social participation - particularly when older adults maintain clear, meaningful goals.

The interplay between physical activity and purpose in life suggests that interventions should address both physical and psychosocial dimensions of aging. From a practical standpoint, health professionals - such as physiotherapists, physical educators, and gerontologists - should design programs that combine structured exercise with activities that foster goal-setting, personal meaning, and social engagement. Such integrated approaches may include group-based exercise classes, culturally relevant recreational activities, volunteer work, or cognitive training, all tailored to the preferences and capacities of older adults.

At the public health level, policies that promote safe, accessible spaces for physical activity, community-based programs, and intergenerational initiatives can contribute to maintaining autonomy, reducing healthcare costs, and enhancing overall quality of life in this growing population segment. Future research should explore the causal pathways linking physical activity and purpose in life, as well as test multidimensional interventions that target both domains simultaneously.

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