

1. Introduction

This briefing sheet is about lifelong learning for people aged 50+ years and how participation in learning can help maintain and improve mental health and wellbeing in later life. There is no commonly agreed definition of 'older' people, and clearly people age at different rates. However, by the mid 50's, for most people retirement is beginning to be a real prospect, age discrimination in the workforce begins to take hold, and those with health difficulties begin to leave work.

In 2007, for the first time in the UK, the number of people aged 65 or over was greater than those aged under 16. Most people now under 60 can expect to spend a third of their adult lives in retirement, and for some it will be a half. By 2072, the number of people aged 65 or more will double and those aged over 80 will treble (RCP 2009).

Lifelong learning can help people to find meaning and purpose in retirement, enabling them to lead healthy and productive lives for as long as possible.

2. Mental health and wellbeing in older people

- Poor mental health and cognitive decline is not an inevitable part of growing old (DH 2009). Most older people remain in relatively good health.
- Loss of status, reduced income, physical health problems, bereavement and loneliness are some of the factors that increase vulnerability to mental health problems in older people.
- 40% of older people attending GP surgeries and 60% of those living in residential institutions are reported to have poor mental health. (DH 2009)
- People over 65 do not have the same access to specialist mental health services as those under 65 (RCP 2009).

3. Older people's participation in learning

- Older people will choose to learn many things, some will fit with government priorities and some will be for personal interest.
- Educational inequality at age 16 continues to widen throughout the lifespan. The earlier someone left school, the less likely they are to take up learning as an adult (55% of people who finished education after 21 do so, compared to 26% of those who left at 16). The higher their level of qualifications the more likely they are to return to learning. (NIACE 2009a).
- Participation in adult learning drops with age, from 78% at age 17-19, 42% at age 45-54, 31% at age 55-64, 18% at age 65-74 and 13% at age 75+. (NIACE 2009a).

4. Impact of participation in learning on health and wellbeing

- Evidence shows that learning can help to promote wellbeing, as well as protect against normal age-related cognitive decline (Foresight 2008).
- When learning takes place in social settings (as it usually does), it can promote wellbeing indirectly through social networking (Foresight 2008).
- Learning helps people to respond positively to change in their environment and circumstances, to remain engaged in society, and to remain physically and mentally active (NIACE 2009b).

5. Older people and work

- Employment is good for health, happiness and prosperity and people should be encouraged to stay longer in work. Supporting people to get back into work when they become redundant, and to overcome age discrimination, is important to ensure that older people do not drop out of employment permanently (Black 2008, NIACE 2009b).
- Employers could benefit considerably from the skills of older people (Foresight 2008).

6. Key challenges

- Access to learning throughout life should be seen as a human right. With most people spending longer in relative good health and independent 'retirement' of some form, public policy for lifelong learning should focus not just on employment, but on social and personal development, and keeping older people healthy, active, contributing members of society.
- We need to reverse the continued negative stereotyping and massive under-utilisation of the mental capital of older people so that their mental capital is recognised as a resource for the benefit of society and for themselves.

7. References

Age discrimination in mental health services: making equality a reality. Royal College of Psychiatrists' position statement PS2/2009. Available on RCP website: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/PS2_2009_for%20websitex.pdf

Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing (2008) Final Project report – Executive Summary. The Government Office for Science, London. Available on Foresight website: www.foresight.gov.uk/Mental%20Capital/Mental_capital_&_wellbeing_Exec_Sum.pdf

Narrowing participation. The NIACE Survey on adult Participation in Learning 2009 (2009a). Fiona Aldridge and Alan Tuckett. £10.95. NIACE. NIACE website: <http://shop.niace.org.uk/narrowing-participation.html>

New Horizons. Towards a shared vision for mental health. Consultation (2009). Department of Health. Website: www.dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/Mentalhealth/NewHorizons/index.htm

Older people's learning: an action plan (2009b) Stephen McNair. NIACE. £10.95. NIACE website: <http://shop.niace.org.uk/older-people-s-learning-an-action-plan.html>

Working for a Healthier Tomorrow (2008) Dame Carol Black. Department of Health. Website: www.workingforhealth.gov.uk/documents/working-for-a-healthier-tomorrow-tagged.pdf

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