

Old age: the meaning of an existential dichotomy.

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In the last few decades, life expectancy has been progressively increasing, just like the number of elderly people.

The old age has often been viewed from a negative perspective, as a period characterized exclusively by losses, deprivations, and demotivations, and by continuous and irreversible skill decline, especially in mental abilities. Biases on the old age have been contrasted by psychology of the elderly and the recent neuroscientific findings. The elderly are able to learn new things, improve their abilities, fulfil themselves as human beings. Brain can adapt, re-build and positively modify itself at any age. There are as many old ages as the number of elderly people. Variability is the main characteristic of the old age. In the elderly, there is a special existential dichotomy, including intermediate conditions: many elderly are independent, active, creative people in good health, as evidenced by the life of famous as well as common people; other elderly people are passive, withdrawn, and suffering from body and mental problems.

In Western societies, many factors affect the aging process and the quality of life of the elderly: genetics, economy, educational-cultural level, personality, kind of household, health, illness, experiences and life events, among which retirement, withdrawal from the living environment, loss of a beloved person, loneliness, social environment.

Prevention, therapeutic and rehabilitation interventions may shrink the gap between healthy, independent elderly and the disabled ones. This must be our ethic, scientific and social commitment. Cross-generation communication, respect and search for dignity, especially for the weakest members of our society, solidarity, and culture represent the proper tools for the promotion of integration and care for the elderly, in order to better know their experiences, their life histories, as well as to think about our personal way of perceiving and understanding life.

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