MOOC 17 Strategies and Actions for Optimizing Intrinsic Capacity

Chapter 3 Empowering Healthy Ageing:
Social Prescribing and Co-Design with Older People

Social prescribing and co-creation are powerful approaches for empowering healthy ageing by actively involving older people in decisions about their health and well-being. Social prescribing connects them to community resources, while co-creation engages them in designing health programs. Together, these approaches foster *a sense of ownership, build social connections, and enhance the ability of older people to manage their health*, leading to more personalized, holistic care and a better quality of life.

The Concept of Social Prescribing in Supporting Healthy Ageing

- **Definition**: Social prescribing is a key element of universal personalised care, connecting individuals to community-based activities, groups, and services that address the practical, social, and emotional needs impacting their health and well-being.
- **Focus**: It targets the underlying causes of health and well-being issues rather than just treating symptoms.
- **Goal**: Social prescribing reduces reliance on traditional health services, such as medication and hospital visits, by addressing social determinants of health like loneliness, stress, inactivity, and poor nutrition, which affect intrinsic capacity.

How Social Prescribing Works?

- **Assessment**: Identify physical, mental, and social needs through healthcare providers or digital platforms.

- **Referral**: A link-worker connects the individual to community resources and helps set meaningful health and well-being goals.

    - Examples:
        - Older adults with social isolation might be referred to local elderly centers offering group exercise or cultural activities.
        - Individuals with mild depression may be connected to art therapy or mindfulness workshops.
        - Caregivers under stress may join support groups or receive counselling services.
- **Follow-Up**: Monitor progress via regular check-ins or digital tools.

- **Social prescription activities**:

Community resources	Social prescribing activity
Volunteering	Voluntary organisations; charity, voluntary or community group
Social support	Social clubs, social interaction; self-help group; emotional support and counselling and practical assistance in reaching local health, social; welfare rights services; addiction services; group for elderly, social club, religious group, or church organization
Artistic activities	Arts program activities, craft activities, crochet activities; interactive museum tours; musical interventions; programme the music and dance; choir, photography; arts, music, or singing group
Physical well-being	Fitness activities; gardening activities; exercise classes; physical activity/fitness; weight management, healthy eating; swimming, fishing; sports club, gym, exercise, or dance group
Lifelong learning	Computer courses, personal development; resilience training; chronic disease self-management courses; education group
Housing support	Fall prevention and counselling classes
Financial support	Emotional support and counselling assistance in economic services

(Sadio, Henriques, Nogueira & Costa, 2024)

Benefits of Social Prescribing

- **Empowerment**: Helps individuals manage existing health problems by connecting them with relevant resources.
- **Enhanced Social Engagement**: Reduces loneliness and depression by promoting community involvement.
- **Promotes Healthy Lifestyles**: Encourages physical activity and healthier living habits.
- **Cost Reduction**: Lowers healthcare costs by addressing non-medical factors contributing to health issues.

Further reading:

- NHS England. (2023). *Social prescribing: Reference guide and technical annex for primary care networks*. Retrieved from https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/social-prescribing-reference-guide-and-technical-annex-for-primary-care-networks/
(This guide provides additional information to help primary care networks introduce the social prescribing link worker role into their multi-disciplinary teams as part of the expansion of the primary care workforce.)

Empowered Ageing Through Co-Design Innovation

Co-design is a participatory methodology that incorporates the ideas, experiences, and values of end users—older adults—into the development of services, programs, or interventions. This methodology recognizes older people as "experts of their experiences" (Visser et al., 2005), ensuring that solutions are tailored, meaningful, and impactful.

Why Co-Design?

Engaging older adults early in the development process allows them to articulate their needs, preferences, and aspirations. This input is crucial for:

- **Contextual Relevance:** Aligning healthcare services or interventions with the unique challenges and lifestyles of older populations.

- **Reducing Research Waste:** Ensuring interventions address real-world user needs.

- **Fostering Empowerment:** By involving older adults as experts of their own experiences, co-design builds confidence, independence, and satisfaction, enabling them to shape services that truly meet their needs.

Core Principles of Co-Design with Older Adults

1. **Equal Partnerships**: Co-design prioritizes equity between older adults and designers, ensuring their perspectives carry equal weight in decision-making. As experts of their experiences, older adults bring valuable insights into challenges and opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked.

2. **Inclusivity**: Diverse groups, including those with disabilities, low digital literacy, or social isolation, are involved to ensure solutions address a broad range of needs.

3. **Iterative Feedback**: Regular testing and refinement with older adults ensure solutions remain user-centered and effective.

4. **Empathy-Driven Innovation**: By deeply understanding the lived experiences of older adults, co-design fosters solutions that are meaningful and impactful.

Applications of Co-Design in Healthy Ageing

1. **Digital Health Tools**: Co-design has been instrumental in creating user-friendly mHealth apps with features like large fonts, simple navigation, and voice prompts.

    o Example: The development of the **iHealth Screen App**, where older adults contributed insights on usability and accessibility, resulting in a tool for self-health management.

2. **Community Programmes and Social Prescribing Platforms:** Co-design has driven localized programmes and platforms that connect older adults to community-based activities, such as exercise classes, social clubs, and cultural events. These initiatives reflect the preferences, cultural practices, and needs of older adults.

Benefits of Co-Design in Healthy Ageing

1. **Improved Adoption and Usability**
Services and programmes developed through co-design are more likely to be embraced by the target population because they reflect the real-world needs, preferences, and priorities of older adults. This enhances usability, promotes sustained engagement, and increases the likelihood of long-term success.

2. **Enhanced Health Outcomes and Well-Being**
Tailored interventions developed through co-design effectively address physical, mental, and social health barriers, such as low digital literacy or cultural differences, resulting in improved overall well-being.

3. **Empowerment, Independence, and Knowledge Sharing**
By involving older adults in the design process, co-design fosters a sense of ownership and confidence, in older adults, empowering them to manage their health independently. The collaborative process also facilitates mutual learning, where older adults share life experiences, and designers offer technical expertise.

4. **Stronger Community Connections**
The collaborative nature of co-design brings people together, creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose. It fosters connections among participants, designers, and community members, reducing isolation and enhancing social engagement.

5. **Innovative, Practical, and Sustainable Solutions**
By leveraging the lived experiences of older adults, co-design ensures solutions are both practical and innovative, addressing gaps younger designers that unfamiliar with the challenges of ageing may overlook.

Co-Design in Action: The "Nutcrackers" Initiative

The **"Nutcrackers" project**, led by the CUHK Institute of Ageing, highlights how co-design empowers older adults to take an active role in shaping community health and age-friendly environments. By moving beyond the role of end-users, participants contribute as co-designers, public space assessors, and project advisors, collaborating with experts in social work, healthcare, housing, and engineering.

Opportunities for Participation
Participants in the Nutcrackers initiative engage in various roles, including:
- **Co-Design Workshops**: Collaborating on the design and improvement of services and spaces.
- **Public Space Assessments**: Evaluating the accessibility and age-friendliness of community spaces.
- **Research Feedback**: Providing insights to refine research projects.
- **Advocacy**: Acting as content creators and ambassadors for age-friendly cities.

Knowledge Transfer
The initiative fosters a two-way knowledge exchange:
- **From Professionals to Participants**: Experts educate older adults on the connection between health, the built environment, and lifestyle.
- **From Participants to Professionals**: Older adults provide valuable feedback and lived experience, refining designs and services for practicality and relevance.

Impact
The Nutcrackers initiative bridges the gap between professional expertise and user needs by:
- **Promoting Healthy Ageing**: Creating innovative, practical solutions that enhance well-being.
- **Fostering Collaboration**: Leveraging the lived experiences of older adults to co-create meaningful change.
- **Improving Community Environments**: Advocating for and implementing age-friendly urban designs.

For more information about *Nutcracker*, please click **here**.

Further reading
National Academy for Social Prescribing. (2023). *A guide to co-designing social prescribing initiatives with older people.* Retrieved from https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/a-guide-to-co-designing-social-prescribing-initiatives-with-older-people/
(Here is a guide to co-design social prescribing initiatives with older people developed by National Academy for Social Prescribing in UK. It contains tips to co-designing social prescribing initiatives. The tips how to find and engage older people in co-design and a practical coaching tool for effective co-design.)

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