



“On Stage In the Golden Age: Theatre for Healthy Ageing”

PROJECT NUMBER: 2023-1-RO01-KA220-ADU-000160973

**WP3 -Joint Training
programme for Social,
Cultural, and Health
Sectors
Module 3**

DOCUMENT PRODUCED BY: UNIWA



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Module Overview (1 page max.)

Module 3	Theatre and theatre activities as prevention and health promotion in old age’s mental health disorders
Module summary / main contents	<p>The aim of Module 3 is to understand the use of theatre as an alternative method of prevention and health promotion in old age mental health disorders.</p> <p>The module provides to learners the skills to conduct theatre activities in their respective contexts and introduces theatre and theatre activities as a prevention and health promotion tool for mental health disorders.</p> <p>Contents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Part I: Theoretical approaches & Key concepts ● Part II: Use of theatre in the aging field: impact, benefits and ethical principles <p>Part III: Types of theatre and theatre activities for preventing mental health issues in older age</p>
Timetable & schedule	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● (100 Min): Presentation with introduction of the module, objectives, key definitions and concepts ● (35 Min): Implementation of Active Learning Group Activity #1 – EMOTIONS CHARADES ● (40 Min): Implementation of Active Learning Group Activity #2 – LIFE STORIES ● (40 Min): Implementation of Active Learning Group Activity #3 – A VISIT ● (10 Min): Multimedia Activity ● (15 Min): Final Quiz with various questions about the topic
Learning outcomes of the module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improve Skills: Look into different ways to use theatrical activities with older adults. ● Provide Knowledge: (1) Definitions and key concepts of theatrical activities and mental health, as well as strategies for preventing and promoting mental health in older adults. (2) Provide activities and exercises for working with older adults.



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Welcome to Module 3:

Theatre and theatre activities as prevention and health promotion in old age’s mental health disorders

Module Overview

Welcome to Module 1: *Theatre and theatre activities as prevention and health promotion in old age’s mental health disorders*. This module explores how theatre, an age-old art form with deep roots in healing and social connection, can benefit older adults’ mental health and well-being.

Through a combination of theory, practical approaches, and various theatre techniques, this training is designed for caregivers, mental health professionals, artists, and anyone interested in the role of theatre as an alternative tool for mental health promotion and intervention. Theatre can be especially beneficial for older individuals, promoting physical, cognitive, and emotional health, reducing loneliness, and providing joy and creative self-expression.



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Participants will gain insights into how theatrical activities can positively impact mental health and gain tools to implement these practices within their professional and personal lives.

Objectives and Learning Outcomes

The aim of Module 1 is to understand the use of theatre as an alternative method of prevention and health promotion in old age’s mental health disorders. This Module provides target groups the skills for implementing theatre activities with older people, in their respective contexts and introduces theatre and theatre activities as a prevention and health promotion tool for mental health disorders.

Introduction

Theatre is one of humanity’s oldest and most impactful art forms. It has been shown to benefit older adults, regardless of their background or health status. Through active participation and social interaction, theatre fosters not only individuals’ well-being but also contributes to broader educational and social change.

Theatre’s therapeutic value as a health-promoting component dates back to ancient time, with roots in healing ceremonies and theatrical performances found across different cultures.



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Older adults are frequently motivated to participate in creative and theatrical activities for a variety of reasons, such as improving their health, furthering their education, seeking recreation, and using the activities for therapy and healing.

Part I. Theoretical approaches & Key concepts

Theatre

The term “theatre” encompasses a variety of meanings, including both a physical place and a form of performing art. *Physical place* indicates a building (usually with a stage) in which spectacles and performances take place. As a *performing art* form, theatre is defined as a collaborative art form where live performers portray the experience of a real or imagined event before and audience in a specific place.



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Theatre and Drama: Similarities and differences

Theatre	Drama
Theatre is a physical entity.	Drama is an abstract entity.
Theatre is the onstage production of a play.	Drama is the script of a play.
There is no direct interaction between the audience and the dramatist.	There is a direct interaction between the reader and the dramatist.
Interpretation of the play depends on the reader.	Interpretation of the play depends on the artists.
<i>Source: https://pediaa.com/difference-between-drama-and-theater</i>	

Mental Health

According to WHO (2022), “*Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to*



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their community. It has intrinsic and instrumental values and is integral to our well-being.”

Mental health is more than the absence of mental disorders. It exists on a complex continuum, which is experienced differently from one person to the next, with varying degrees of difficulty and distress and potentially very different social and clinical outcomes.

Mental health conditions include mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities as well as other mental states associated with significant distress, impairment in functioning, or risk of self-harm. People with mental conditions are more likely to experience lower levels of mental well-being, but this is not always or necessarily the case (WHO, 2022).

Aging and Mental Health

The global population of older adults is rapidly growing, with people now living longer than previous generations. By 2050, the number of individuals aged 65 and over worldwide is projected to more than double, increasing from 761 million in 2021 to 1.6 billion. While this increase reflects advancements in healthcare and quality of life, it also brings unique challenges. Aging individuals often become more susceptible to health issues, including pandemics, chronic illnesses, mental health disorders,



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Alzheimer’s disease, and other forms of dementia. Rates of dementia and mild cognitive impairment rise notably with age across all countries, prompting responses from organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) to address these growing concerns.

Approximately 14% of adults aged 60 and over live with a mental disorder (GHDx, 2021). Mental health disorders account for 10.6% of the total years lived with disability among older adults (WHO, 2023), with depression and anxiety being the most common conditions. Addressing mental health needs among the elderly population is essential for improving quality of life and supporting healthy aging in a growing demographic.

Mental Health Challenges Facing Older Adults

At older ages, mental health is shaped not only by physical and social environments but also by the cumulative impacts of earlier life experiences and specific stressors related to aging. Exposure to adversity, significant loss in intrinsic capacity and a decline in functional ability can all result in psychological distress. Specifically, key challenges in mental health for older adults are social isolation and loneliness, cognitive decline, physical health issues, ageism and stigma.



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Social isolation and loneliness can exacerbate mental health issues. They affect about a quarter of older people (Teo et al., 2023) and are an important risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease, major depression, and generalized anxiety disorder, as well as for cardiovascular and metabolic diseases (Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Kuiper et al., 2016; Valtorta et al., 2016).

Cognitive decline due to aging can lead to depression or anxiety. Seniors with depression or dementia have complex medical needs that require precise coordination between primary and mental health care providers. It is necessary to address treatment interactions, medication management, and co-morbidities, which can get tough to manage.

Physical health issues may limit participation in conventional therapies. Some older adults are at greater risk of depression and anxiety, because of poor physical health or lack of access to quality support and services. This includes older adults living with chronic illnesses (such as heart disease, cancer or stroke), or neurological conditions (such as dementia).

Ageism and stigma against mental disorders

Aging and older adults are often discussed by the general public and the media using negative stereotypes, such as a decline in mental and cognitive function. Unfortunately, this type of



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pejorative view of later life may be internalised by older individuals themselves and enacted, creating a vicious circle resulting in poor mental health. Ageism causes inequalities and has detrimental effects on the individual, community and society (Nguyten & Jeste, 2021). Stigma can lead to delayed diagnosis and treatment because older individuals may not want to seek help due to their lack of knowledge about mental ailments. They might also fear judgment from others, causing them to bury the issue and suffer in silence.



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Part II: Use of theatre in the aging field: impact, benefits and ethical principles

Creativity is widely recognised as a pathway to active and healthy ageing (Cristini & Cesa-Bianchi, 2019; O’Neill, 2019). Research indicates that incorporating theatrical activities into creative interventions can significantly improve the physical and mental health, as well as the psychosocial well-being of older adults.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) and the European Commission have strongly advocated for active and healthy ageing, proposing **arts-based interventions** that link the benefits of creativity to both physical and mental health.

Particularly, WHO (2019) has provided strong evidence that the arts help promote good health, prevent various mental and physical health issues and treat or manage acute and chronic conditions that emerge during people’s lives.

Benefits of Theatre for Older Adults

The existing studies provide evidence that older adults, including those with dementia–Alzheimer, can benefit from participating in theatrical programs and activities that bring joy, break isolation,



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boost physical fitness, reconfigure relationships, stimulate the imagination, and improve cognitive abilities.

Studies on older people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease have shown that this population can fully participate in theatrical practices that are appropriate for their abilities and that employing specific theatrical techniques that improve their health, and overall well-being will benefit them most.

Despite the limited research on theatre and drama-based interventions for older people in dementia care around the world (Keisari et al., 2020), there is evidence that the existing programs can improve positive emotions, learning, social skills, communication, and self-esteem while also reducing depressive symptoms (see, for example, Zeisel et al., 2018; Stevens, 2012).

Health and Cognition

Theatre offers a range of remarkable benefits for older adults, impacting both health and cognitive abilities. Engaging in theatrical activities supports significant improvements in cognitive functioning, enhancing memory, word generation, comprehension, and problem-solving skills. These mental abilities keep the mind agile, promoting intellectual stimulation in an enjoyable and social context. Furthermore, participating in theatre helps reduce stress, which is vital for overall well-being



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and resilience. Research indicates that involvement in theatre can also reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, offering a creative outlet for emotional expression and means to connect with others, which supports mental health and a sense of community. Together, these benefits make theatre a powerful tool for enhancing the quality of life for older adults.

Emotional and Social Benefits

Theatre offers a wealth of benefits for older adults, enriching their lives emotionally, socially, and interpersonally. Engaging in theatre activities can foster new relationships and friendships, creating opportunities to build trust and empathy across generations. This collaborative environment helps older adults connect with peers, family members, caregivers, and healthcare professionals, nurturing a network of positive and supportive relationships.

Participating in theatre can also bolster self-confidence and provide a strong sense of self-affirmation. Through creative expression, individuals often experience feelings of excitement, joy, and freedom, which can lead to a significant boost in mood and overall well-being. Theatre encourages self-expression and imagination, adding an element of fun to daily life.



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Additionally, theatre helps older adults strengthen their communication skills and improve interpersonal relationships. This medium provides a unique space where participants can actively engage, listen, and share, building skills that enhance connection with others and foster lasting, meaningful relationships. Through these rich experiences, theatre truly enriches the lives of older adults by supporting emotional fulfillment, social connection, and personal growth.

Creativity and learning

Theatre offers a multitude of benefits for older adults, fostering creativity, learning, and a sense of community. Engaging in theatre encourages the development of new skills, providing opportunities for individuals to challenge themselves and embrace risks even later in life. This creative expression allows for play and fun, nurturing a vibrant sense of self and making space for joy and spontaneity. Through theatre, older adults have the chance to defy ageist stereotypes, promoting a more inclusive society that values the contributions of people of all ages. Additionally, participating in theatre helps individuals cultivate their creative selves and acquire theatre, drama, and acting skills. Together, these benefits empower older adults to stay connected, creative, and confident, enhancing their lives and enriching their communities.

Physical Fitness



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Engaging in theatre offers numerous physical benefits for older adults, supporting both body and mind. Through movement and expression on stage, theatre activities help improve mobility, flexibility, and strength, contributing significantly to physical fitness. The physical demands of theatre, from stretching to performing, promote better balance and cardiovascular health, which are essential for maintaining independence and preventing falls.

Theatre also enhances body awareness, encouraging participants to be more mindful of their movements. This attention to physical benefits contributes to a healthier lifestyle, enabling older adults to enjoy a fuller, more active life.

Prevention of mental disorders among older adults using arts

The prevalence of mental health issues among older adults is a growing concern, as this population often faces unique stressors, including retirement, loss of loved ones, and the physical and cognitive declines associated with aging. While traditional therapies play an important role, evidence increasingly supports the benefits of arts and cultural engagement as a means to promote mental health and well-being among older adults. Participating in the arts – whether through painting, music, theatre, or dance – provides a multi-faceted approach that addresses emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of health, thus reducing the risk of mental disorders and enhancing quality of life.



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Arts Participation and Mental Health

One of the core benefits of arts engagement for mental health lies in its capacity to reduce psychological distress and promote life satisfaction. Research indicates that frequent engagement in arts and cultural activities has a positive impact on mental well-being, contributing to lower levels of distress and increased happiness and satisfaction with life (Wang, Mak and Fancourt, 2020). Arts provide an avenue for creative expression, allowing individuals to explore and process their emotions in a constructive and often therapeutic manner. Through various forms of art, participants find ways to express and manage feelings, creating opportunities for emotional release and a sense of personal growth. Engaging in these activities is not merely a distraction from daily life; it also becomes an essential part of coping mechanism, supporting mental resilience in the face of stress and emotional challenges.

Emotional Regulation through the Arts

Artistic activities serve as powerful tools for emotional regulation, offering a safe space to manage complex feelings and encouraging healthy coping strategies. There are three primary ways arts contribute to emotional regulation for older adults. First, as a form of avoidance, the arts provide a safe and immersive space where individuals can shift their attention away from negative or distressing thoughts. In moments of sadness or



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anxiety, focusing on a creative project can offer relief, grounding the individual in the present moment and reducing the immediate impact of negative emotions. Second, as an approach strategy, engaging in the arts enables participants to confront, process, and make sense of their feelings. Through performance, they can externalize difficult emotions, releasing negativity and finding clarity in their feelings. Finally, the arts support self-development, fostering an enhanced sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and personal agency (Fancourt et al., 2019). For older adults, this can be particularly beneficial as they navigate the complexities of aging, reinforcing a positive self-image and fostering a renewed sense of purpose.

Group Participation and Social Well-Being

Social isolation and loneliness are common mental health challenges for older adults, often contributing to feelings of depression and anxiety. Group-based arts activities, such as theatre, are highly effective in counteracting loneliness and promoting social well-being. By participating in these group activities, older adults can develop meaningful connections, which in turn provide a sense of community, belonging, and shared purpose. These group engagements have been shown to improve life satisfaction and strengthen feelings of purpose, offering participants a valuable network of social support (Bone et al., 2022). Beyond social benefits, group arts activities are linked to improved health outcomes, including reduced incidence of chronic illnesses, enhanced immune function, and better mental



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health (Steptoe & Fancourt, 2020). The structured nature of these activities fosters routine and motivation, while the positive interactions reinforce emotional stability and resilience, creating a holistic approach to well-being.

Arts and Cognitive Health

Another significant benefit of arts engagement for older adults lies in its impact on cognitive health. Cognitive decline, including memory loss and decreased problem-solving abilities, is a common concern among aging adults. Studies reveal that active engagement in arts activities can play a role in slowing cognitive decline. Arts engagement stimulates the brain, encouraging neuroplasticity and enhancing overall cognitive function. According to Fancourt and Steptoe (2018), older adults who actively participate in the arts often report a higher quality of life and a greater sense of mental sharpness, which may help to delay the progression of cognitive disorders. This combination of creative and cognitive engagement in the arts creates an environment that keeps the mind active and encourages lifelong learning, which is essential for maintaining cognitive health in older age.



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Part III: Types of theatre and theatre activities for preventing mental health issues in older age

The aging process brings a variety of changes in physical health, emotional resilience, and cognitive abilities. To support older adults in navigating these changes, many communities and healthcare providers are turning to innovative solutions like theatrical intervention programs. These programs provide a unique way to promote mental well-being and offer an enjoyable, creative outlet for older people. They are designed not only to help maintain cognitive health but also to enhance overall quality of life, promoting a sense of independence, community, and self-expression.

A wide range of theatrical activities can be used for older adults. Each type has unique characteristics, goals, and methods, offering opportunities for social engagement and cognitive stimulation. Among these interventions, Playback Theatre, Reminiscence Theatre, and Readers' Theatre are notable for their benefits to older adults' health and independence.

In addition to these specific formats, there is a broader spectrum of theatre-inspired programs that incorporate sensory, dramatic, and aesthetic activities. Some of these exercises are music-based



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or designed to engage the imagination, allowing participants to express themselves creatively in a low-pressure environment.

Another key feature of theatrical interventions for older adults is the inclusion of therapeutic approaches, such as drama therapy. Drama therapy combines creative expression with therapeutic intent, allowing older adults to explore personal narratives, feelings, and relationships in a supportive environment. In these programs, participants engage in theatre games, storytelling, story writing, photography, puppetry, and poetry to stimulate memory, facilitate life reflection, and promote emotional release. For instance, story writing or poetry exercises encourage participants to organize their thoughts and feelings, which can help with memory recall and emotional processing. Photography and puppetry offer non-verbal ways of expressing oneself, particularly useful for individuals who may have limited verbal abilities due to cognitive decline. Such activities serve as therapeutic tools, helping participants feel more grounded and reflective, while providing moments of personal insight and accomplishment.

Memory-focused activities are especially popular in creative programs designed for older adults. This is particularly true for individuals living with dementia, as memory exercises have been shown to support brain health and slow cognitive decline. Simple theatre-based memory games, such as recalling lines or participating in storytelling circles, encourage mental agility and can boost participants' sense of accomplishment. Cognitive



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engagement is crucial for slowing down the progression of cognitive impairments and helping individuals maintain a sense of independence and mental clarity. Programs that incorporate elements of drama and creativity allow participants to interact with others in a fun, supportive setting, which can uplift their mood and reduce feelings of frustration associated with memory loss.

In designing these programs, it is essential to consider the entertainment, healing, and educational aspects of theatre and drama activities. Theater activities for older adults must always be enjoyable, accessible, and well-suited to the participants' physical, emotional, and social needs. Accessibility is key, as older adults may face physical limitations, mobility restrictions, or sensory impairments. For example, activities that require minimal physical movement or involve large-print scripts and gentle audio cues are more inclusive for participants with sensory or mobility challenges. Ensuring that these activities are tailored to the specific abilities and preferences of participants allows for a more fulfilling experience and reduces the risk of frustration or fatigue.

One of the significant challenges in designing theatre interventions for older adults lies in the variety of psychosocial needs across this population. Older adults come from diverse backgrounds, with different cultural experiences, personal histories, and social expectations. What might be enjoyable or therapeutic for one individual may not resonate with another, making a “one-size-fits-all” approach ineffective. Instead, interventions must be flexible and customizable, allowing



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facilitators to adapt activities to suit each participant’s unique needs and preferences. A personalized approach not only enhances engagement but also builds trust and rapport between participants and facilitators, which is essential for creating a safe and supportive environment.

By implementing tailored approaches, creative interventions can improve the well-being and quality of life of older adults in meaningful ways. Programs that respect individual difference, whether in cognitive ability, physical capacity, or personal interests, are more likely to be effective and meaningful. When older adults feel that their needs and preferences are acknowledged, they are more likely to fully engage in the activity, gain a sense of accomplishment, and experience increased self-worth. This improved sense of well-being contributes to both mental and emotional health, reducing anxiety and feelings of isolation, which are common challenges among older adults.

Most frequent types of theatre and drama-based programs and approaches for older adults

The most frequently cited types of theatre and drama-based programs and approaches for older individuals with and without dementia- Alzheimer and their caregivers are as follows:

Creative Drama



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Creative (improvisational) drama is an arts-based activity that has been shown to have significant personal and social value for older adults as a side effect or immediate result of participating in a series of such activities. It refers to dramatic activities that are designed to help participants develop their cognitive, affective, aesthetic, and moral thinking skills, including those with dementia–Alzheimer.

Reminiscence Theatre

Reminiscence Theatre is a form of interactive drama in which older adults share memories and experiences through dialogue, storytelling, and creative activities. It takes verbatim memories as the basis for theatre scripts, using the experiences of older people as a source of artistic production and therapeutic creativity (e.g., Kosti, 2018; Schweitzer, 2007).

Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre is a type of improvisational theatre in which audience members volunteer stories from their lives and watch them performed on stage. Keisari and colleagues (2020) used playback theatre in a structured 12-week group intervention and found significant improvements in self-esteem, positive affect,



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meaning in life, and quality of life, as well as a significant decrease in depressive disorders.

Improvisation Theatre (or Theatre Improvisation)

It is a stimulating and imaginative way for seniors to keep up their cognitive abilities, interpersonal skills, and active participation. Improvisatory theatre techniques may also prove advantageous for caregivers as a means of coping with the challenges they encounter (e.g., Bassis, Rybko, & Maor, 2023).

The 'Veder Method'

It is a theatre-based communication method that uses theatrical stimuli (e.g., songs, poetry) in conjunction with person-centred approaches to encourage vulnerable people to make contact. This is not only for the person who is having difficulty making contact but also for those around them, such as family members and caregivers. The 'Veder Method' was developed for people with dementia and their caregivers, but it can be applied to a wide range of cognitive impairments and psychiatric disorders (e.g., van Haeften-van Dijk, van Weert, & Dröes, 2015).



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Veder Contact Method

This is a modified version of the original Veder Method, tailored specifically for daily care settings. It emphasises integrating theatrical, poetic, and musical communication into routine caregiving tasks rather than relying on structured performances. The aim is to enhance everyday interactions between caregivers and residents by using elements of the Veder Method during personal care activities. It involves training caregivers to incorporate elements of theatrical communication into their caregiving practices without needing extensive performance skills (Boersma et al., 2017).

Readers' Theatre

Readers' Theatre is a form of drama that requires participants to read aloud a scripted narrative to the audience. Participants have their scripts in hand and act without the necessity of memorising lines. Readers Theatre may not utilise any performance, scenery, props, or costumes, and the plays performed are one-act or brief adaptations of longer productions. No acting experience is necessary (eg., Khanlou et al., 2022).



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Recreational Drama

It makes use of a variety of dramatic activities to provide older people with recreational opportunities (e.g., Sextou & Smith, 2017).

Life-crossroads

It is an active life review method that uses carefully selected autobiographical memories, self-defining life experiences, or life periods that shaped a participant. Participants can easily explore identity, meaning, and relationships with their surroundings by sharing and bringing life-crossroads stories to life (e.g., Keisari & Palgi, 2017).

TimeSlips

It is a creative, group storytelling method for people with Alzheimer’s disease and related disorders. The method makes use of storytelling to engage people with dementia in meaningful ways. It acknowledges the importance of creative storytelling for people with dementia, shifting the emphasis from memory to imagination (Basting, 2013).



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Ethical Principles for Theatre and Drama–based Work with Older People

Theatrical programs and interventions involving older adults must prioritise inclusivity, diversity, and the ethical integrity of professionals, as with any creative endeavor that engages and stimulates human potential.

Inclusivity must be a top priority, which means that the program should be designed to cater to individuals of all backgrounds and abilities. This approach ensures that older adults from diverse backgrounds can participate and benefit from the program, regardless of their social, cultural, or physical differences.

In this context, *diversity* refers to the range of experiences, perspectives, and ideas that are brought to the program. By incorporating diversity into the program, it is possible to create more dynamic and engaging experiences that appeal to a broader range of participants.

The *ethical integrity* of professionals must also be considered. This simply means that the professionals involved in the program must be trustworthy, knowledgeable, and experienced. They must operate with honesty, transparency,



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and respect for the participants, ensuring that the program is safe, effective, and beneficial for all involved.



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