

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

Module 4

DOCUMENT PRODUCED BY: EDRA

Module Overview

Module 4	Theatre and theatre activities as management and treatment methods in old age's mental health disorders
Module summary / main contents	<p>This module explores the role of theatre as an effective tool for the management and treatment of mental health disorders in older adults. Grounded in theories of reminiscence therapy, drama therapy, cognitive stimulation, and psychosocial aging, the module provides a comprehensive overview of how theatre can support cognitive, emotional, and social health in elderly populations. The creative, embodied nature of theatre allows older adults to reconnect with their memories, express emotions, engage socially, and even challenge cognitive decline through active participation.</p> <p>Unit 1: Theoretical Approaches of Theatre in Old Age Mental Health</p> <p>Unit 2: The Use of Theatre as Management and Treatment of Mental Health Disorders in Old Age</p> <p>Unit 3: Types of Theatre Activities Implemented for the Management and Treatment of Mental Health Disorders in Old Age and Their Impact</p>
Timetable & schedule [4h in total]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (60 min): Presentation of the theoretical part • (160 min): Practical exercises to enhance the acquisition of contents • (20 min): Interactive activity
Learning outcomes of the module	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the theoretical foundations of theatre in old age mental health treatment • Recognize the benefits of theatre for mental health

	<p>in older adults</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply knowledge of theatre interventions to practical scenarios • Evaluate the impact of theatre-based interventions on elderly populations
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Introduction of the module 4

This module explores the role of theatre as an effective tool for the management and treatment of mental health disorders in older adults. Grounded in theories of reminiscence therapy, drama therapy, cognitive stimulation, and psychosocial aging, the module provides a comprehensive overview of how theatre can support cognitive, emotional, and social health in elderly populations. The creative, embodied nature of theatre allows older adults to reconnect with their memories, express emotions, engage socially, and even challenge cognitive decline through active participation.

Learning Outcomes

- Understand the theoretical foundations of theatre in old age mental health treatment
- Recognize the benefits of theatre for mental health in older adults
- Apply knowledge of theatre interventions to practical scenarios
- Evaluate the impact of theatre-based interventions on elderly populations

Unit 1: Theoretical Approaches of Theatre in Old Age Mental Health

The use of theatre and theatrical activities as a therapeutic tool for addressing mental health disorders in the elderly is grounded in several psychological, sociological, and therapeutic theories. These theories

emphasize the healing power of creativity, expression, and social engagement, which can help improve cognitive, emotional, and social well-being in older adults. Below are some of the most relevant theories that inform the use of theatre as a management and treatment method for mental health disorders in old age.

1.1 Reminiscence Therapy

Reminiscence therapy involves recalling and reflecting on past experiences, often through storytelling or creative expression. It is commonly used with older adults to improve mental health, cognitive function, and emotional well-being.

Application in Theatre

Theatre activities, especially those that involve storytelling or role-playing based on personal memories, can serve as a form of reminiscence therapy. Through these activities, older adults can re-examine and reframe life experiences, thereby enhancing self-esteem and reducing feelings of isolation or depression. The use of tangible stimulus objects (e.g., letters, vintage items, photos) can significantly enhance reminiscence theatre activities. These items act as memory prompts and help reduce the emotional barrier to storytelling, enabling older adults to connect more deeply and naturally with past experiences.

Theoretical Basis

- Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson believed that late adulthood is a time for making sense out of one's life, finding meaning to one's existence, and adjusting to inevitable death. He called this stage ego integrity vs. despair. Theatre provides a platform for this life review, enabling older adults to achieve a sense of integrity and reduce feelings of despair.

- Butler’s Life Review Theory

Butler proposed that life review is a natural process which we all resort to when we are approaching the end of our lives. He defined life review as a natural event in which an individual recalls his/her past experiences, evaluates them, and analyzes them in order to achieve a more profound self-concept. Theatre can help externalize these reflections through performance, making it an ideal therapeutic tool for life review.

Impact of Reminiscence Therapy on Mental Health

- Reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Improved sense of identity and life satisfaction
- Enhanced memory recall and cognitive function

1.2 Drama based Activities

Drama activities involve the intentional use of theatre processes to achieve therapeutic goals, such as emotional expression, social interaction, and cognitive stimulation. It is particularly beneficial for older adults dealing with dementia, depression, anxiety, and social isolation.

Application in Theatre

Theatre exercises, such as memory games, improvisation, and scene creation, require older adults to engage cognitively by recalling information, solving problems, and using language skills. These activities are aligned with the principles of CST and can enhance cognitive functioning. Using props or symbolic objects in drama (such as masks, costumes, or familiar household items) encourages emotional distance and can make self-expression feel less vulnerable, especially for participants dealing with anxiety or trauma.

Theoretical Basis

- Role Theory

Developed by Jacob L. Moreno (the founder of psychodrama), this theory suggests that people can explore different aspects of their identity by "trying on" different roles. For older adults, assuming different characters in theatre can help them explore feelings, deal with trauma, and manage the transitions associated with aging.

- Creative Drama and Embodied Cognition

Theories of embodied cognition propose that engaging in physical activities such as theatre helps stimulate brain function. The act of performing or physically embodying a role can enhance cognitive abilities in older adults, such as attention, memory, and executive functioning.

Impact on Mental Health:

- Increased emotional regulation and coping strategies
- Reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression, and loneliness
- Improved cognitive function, particularly in older adults with dementia
- Enhanced social engagement and communication skills

1.3 Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST)

Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) is a group therapy intervention designed to improve cognitive function in older adults, particularly those with mild to moderate dementia. It involves activities that encourage mental engagement, such as discussions, games, and creative tasks like theatre.

Application in Theatre

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Theoretical Basis

- **Cognitive Reserve Theory**
This theory suggests that mentally stimulating activities can help build a "cognitive reserve," allowing individuals to better cope with cognitive decline. Theatre activities, which involve problem-solving, language use, and creativity, can contribute to this reserve and slow the progression of cognitive decline in older adults.
- **Neuroplasticity**
Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. Theatre activities that challenge cognitive and emotional skills can stimulate brain plasticity, particularly in older adults, helping to maintain or improve cognitive function.

Impact on Mental Health

- Improved memory and attention
- Slower cognitive decline in those with dementia
- Enhanced problem-solving and language skills
- Reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety

1.4 Psychosocial Theories of Aging

Activity Theory (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953):

This theory posits that older adults are happiest when they stay active and engaged with their environment. Theatre activities provide a structured, socially engaging way for older adults to remain active, which can improve overall mental health.

Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1989):

This theory suggests that older adults strive to maintain a sense of continuity in their lives, retaining previous roles, values, and activities.

Participating in theatre allows older adults to preserve and adapt their social roles, which can help them maintain psychological stability and identity.

Application in Theatre

Theatre workshops, drama groups, and performances can help older adults maintain their social roles and stay engaged with their communities. Role-play and collaborative storytelling promote socialization, which is crucial for mental health in older adults.

Impact on Mental Health

- Enhanced social connectivity and reduced isolation
- Increased self-esteem and sense of purpose
- Improved emotional well-being and reduced symptoms of depression

1.5 Embodied Theatre and Somatic Approaches

This approach emphasizes the physical and sensory aspects of performance. Through movement, gesture, and voice, embodied theatre encourages individuals to express emotions and experiences that may be difficult to verbalize. For older adults, this can help release tension and address emotional challenges related to aging.

Application in Theatre

Somatic movement and body-focused exercises, such as those used in embodied theatre, can help older adults connect with their bodies in new ways. This is especially beneficial for individuals with dementia, as it provides non-verbal ways of communication and emotional expression.

Theoretical Basis

Embodiment theory in psychology and philosophy argues that cognition is deeply linked to bodily experience. By engaging the body through theatre, older adults can stimulate cognitive and emotional processing in ways that verbal therapies may not achieve.

Impact on Mental Health

- Reduced stress and anxiety through movement-based expression
- Enhanced body awareness and emotional release
- Improved mood and emotional regulation
- Increased social interaction and reduced isolation

1.6 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the role of observation and imitation in learning behaviors. Through participation in group theatre activities, older adults can learn coping strategies, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills by observing others and experimenting with new roles.

Application in Theatre

Theatre provides a safe environment for older adults to explore new behaviors and roles, and to learn by watching others in the group. This shared experience can enhance social support and lead to positive behavior change

Impact on Mental Health

- Increased sense of belonging and social cohesion

- Improved coping mechanisms for dealing with stress or mental health challenges
- Enhanced interpersonal skills and social connectedness
- Reduction in depressive symptoms and anxiety

1.7 Using Stimulus Objects to Enhance Storytelling and Reduce Inhibition

In therapeutic theatre work with older adults, especially those experiencing anxiety, trauma, or cognitive impairments, initiating creative engagement can be a challenge. Stimulus objects—such as personal memorabilia (objects kept or collected because of their associations with memorable people or events), symbolic items, or sensory props—can serve as powerful bridges between internal experience and outward expression.

These objects can:

- Trigger memory and encourage reminiscence
- Facilitate storytelling without pressure to perform
- Support non-verbal expression in cases of limited language ability
- Reduce inhibition by offering emotional distance or metaphor

Common examples include:

- Old letters, postcards, suitcases
- Personal artifacts, toys, costume elements
- Photographs, recipe books, or music-related items
- Scarves, fabrics, or objects with textures

Incorporating these into theatre workshops enables facilitators to focus on the process of storytelling and self-expression over performance, making

theatre more accessible and therapeutic for older adults across cognitive and emotional spectrums.

Unit 2: The Use of Theatre as Management and Treatment of Mental Health Disorders in Old Age

This chapter will explore **how** theatre is practically applied to address mental health disorders in the elderly population. It will examine specific therapeutic outcomes related to various mental health challenges and highlight the benefits of using theatre in different clinical and community settings. The section will also look at how theatre intersects with broader healthcare interventions for older adults.

2.1 The Role of Theatre in Cognitive Decline and Dementia

Cognitive stimulation and memory

Theatre exercises help improve cognitive functions like memory, attention, and problem-solving. For instance, rehearsing lines or improvising scenes involves memory recall, linguistic processing, and mental flexibility.

Initiatives like **TimeSlips** (a creative storytelling program for people with dementia) and **Playback Theatre** focus on using personal stories to stimulate cognitive processes in elderly individuals with Alzheimer's or dementia.

Outcomes

These interventions have been shown to slow cognitive decline, improve mood, and enhance the quality of life in elderly patients suffering from dementia.

2.2 Emotional and Psychological Well-being

Participating in theatre provides a form of creative expression that can alleviate feelings of depression and anxiety. Older adults can release pent-

up emotions through acting and storytelling, offering a cathartic experience.

Theatre allows individuals to explore new roles and identities, often leading to increased confidence and a renewed sense of purpose. **Psychodrama** has been used to help older adults re-examine life events and transform negative self-perceptions.

Storytelling activities that emphasize self-expression rather than performance can offer a cathartic release for older adults. Facilitators can use stimulus objects to inspire narratives, such as asking participants to ‘tell the story of this suitcase’ or ‘imagine what this letter says,’ which makes storytelling more intuitive and engaging.

TIP FOR FACILITATORS:

Use simple prompts and symbolic items (e.g., an empty picture frame, a toy, a scarf) to spark imagination and bypass performance anxiety. Encourage participants to invent or relate stories freely.

Outcomes

Theatre-based therapy has been shown to **reduce depressive symptoms** and **enhance emotional regulation** in the elderly, particularly those dealing with the challenges of aging, loss, or isolation.

2.3 Social Interaction and Combating Loneliness

Group theatre activities encourage older adults to interact, build friendships, and develop social networks. This is particularly beneficial in preventing feelings of loneliness and social isolation, both of which are significant risk factors for mental health problems in old age.

Programs like **The Elders Company** at the Royal Exchange Theatre (UK) and **Senior Theatre USA** are examples of how elderly individuals participate in

communal performances, maintaining their social roles and contributing to their community’s cultural life.

Outcomes

Theatre programs have shown significant improvements in **social well-being** and **reduced isolation**, which are critical factors in mental health treatment for older adults.

2.4 Theatre and Physical Well-being

Body movement and engagement: Theatre, especially when incorporating elements like movement and dance, can promote physical activity. For older adults, this helps improve coordination, balance, and even pain management (e.g., in arthritis sufferers).

Somatic therapies: Techniques such as embodied theatre involve expressive movement, encouraging older adults to reconnect with their physical selves, which may positively impact both their physical and mental health

Outcomes

Theatre activities that incorporate movement have been shown to **improve physical health** markers and reduce the negative impact of comorbidities, such as chronic pain, on mental health.

Unit 3: Types of Theatre Activities Implemented for the Management and Treatment of Mental Health Disorders in Old Age and Their Impact

This chapter focuses on the **specific types of theatre activities** used to manage and treat mental health disorders in older adults. It will provide examples of these activities and discuss their measurable impacts on the mental health of participants.

3.1 Reminiscence Theatre

Reminiscence theatre involves the creation of performances based on

participants’ life stories or collective memories. It is often used in elder care settings, particularly for those with dementia.

Activity Example

Life Review Performances, where older adults share memories that are transformed into a script and then performed by themselves or others. Facilitators can introduce memory props – such as household objects or memorabilia – to support participants in recalling and expressing life experiences. Rather than aiming for a polished performance, the focus should be on co-creating and sharing meaningful stories in a supportive group setting

Impact

Studies show that reminiscence theatre enhances self-esteem, promotes life satisfaction, and improves cognitive function by activating memory recall.

3.2 Improvisational Theatre

Improvisation involves unscripted and spontaneous performances, where participants react and create dialogues in the moment. This form of theatre encourages flexibility, quick thinking, and emotional expression.

Activity Example

Playback Theatre, where older adults tell personal stories and watch actors instantly re-enact them. Another improvisational activity involves **group scene creation**, where the elderly create a narrative collaboratively.

Impact

Improvisation has been linked to **improved social skills**, **reduced anxiety**, and **increased cognitive engagement**. It can also foster a sense of joy and

accomplishment, particularly for participants with dementia, who may otherwise struggle with structured activities.

3.3 Drama based Activities

Theatre techniques like role-play, storytelling, and performance are used to achieve therapeutic goals. It often involves therapeutic acting out of real or fictional scenarios. Drama-based interventions should prioritize the **emotional authenticity** of the experience rather than the quality of acting. Role-playing a scene using an object (e.g., pretending a scarf is a baby blanket) encourages participants to express feelings through symbolic interaction.

Activity Example

Role Reversal—participants act out different perspectives in a situation they’ve experienced. This can help them gain new insights into their emotions and challenges.

Impact

Drama based activities have been effective in healing depression, trauma, and anxiety in older adults. It allows participants to express difficult emotions in a safe, creative environment, promoting emotional resilience and self-awareness.

3.4 Scripted Theatre Performances

Unlike improvisation, scripted theatre involves participants memorizing and rehearsing lines from a pre-written play. This approach can be adapted for cognitive stimulation or collaborative performance.

Activity Example

Intergenerational theatre groups, where older adults perform with younger actors, often focusing on plays that explore themes of aging or historical moments the participants lived through.

Impact

Participating in scripted theatre activities has been shown to improve **cognitive function** through memorization and repetition and enhance **social cohesion** through collaborative teamwork. Additionally, the performance aspect boosts **self-confidence** and a sense of accomplishment.

3.5 Puppetry and Mask Work

These creative arts, often used in therapeutic contexts, allow participants to express emotions indirectly through puppets or masks. This can be particularly useful for individuals who struggle with verbal communication or have difficulty expressing their feelings. Puppets or masks can be used not only for expression but also as externalizations of internal states. Adding stimulus objects into the puppet's 'world' can lead to metaphor-rich storytelling and reduce self-consciousness.

Activity Example

Workshops where older adults create and perform using masks or puppets. Participants might enact stories related to their own emotions or experiences, allowing them to explore feelings from a safe distance.

Impact

These activities have been shown to help with **emotional expression**, **anxiety reduction**, and **self-confidence**, especially in individuals who feel self-conscious or inhibited.

3.6 Movement-Based Theatre (Embodied Theatre)



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

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

Movement-based theatre emphasizes the use of the body to convey emotions and narratives. It is particularly beneficial for older adults with cognitive impairments, as it taps into non-verbal communication. Movement theatre can be supported by objects that encourage physical interaction—such as a ball passed between participants to represent emotions, or flowing fabric to represent memories. This makes abstract emotions tangible and helps reduce inhibition.

Activity Example

Simple movement exercises that encourage participants to express their feelings through physical gestures or dance-like motions.

Impact

Movement-based activities promote **physical health**, help with **body awareness**, and can reduce **anxiety** and **stress** by facilitating emotional release.



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“ON STAGE IN THE GOLDEN AGE: THEATRE FOR HEALTHY AGEING”

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

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