

2025 INNOVATIVE RESEARCH ON AGING AWARDS

Recent research that can impact the aging services industry



The Innovative Research on Aging Awards recognize recent applied research that offers important implications for the senior living and aging services industries. Created to inspire next practices, the annual award honors groups and individuals for their research that can make a difference in the lives of older adults.

Each year, Mather Institute reviews dozens of submissions on a wide range of topics, including health and well-being of senior living residents, technological advancements for older adults, the senior living workforce, and aging in place. The Institute selects award recipients based on:

- relevance to important problems in the senior living industry
- quality of research methods
- potential actionability of findings and recommendations
- innovativeness of investigations

We hope these findings will benefit the industry as a whole, as organizations transform them into next practices.

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2025 GOLD AWARD RECIPIENT



2025 GOLD AWARD
RECIPIENT

CONNECTING TO NATURE ONLINE

Supporting Social Wellness in Assisted Living

The University of Texas at Arlington: Rebecca L. Mauldin, PhD; Anna Tulloh, MSW

Metropolitan State University of Denver: Megan R. Westmore, MSSW

University of Mississippi, University, MS: Keith A. Anderson, PhD

FOCUS: Does viewing nature-focused livestreams together boost social wellness?

“Positive relations with others is critical for overall psychological well-being.”

Assisted living residents with physical or cognitive limitations may have few options for direct engagement with nature and for social interaction. Previous research has shown that isolation from nature can erode mental well-being, and that isolation from other people can lead to poorer cognitive, mental, and physical health. Fortunately, viewing nature-focused livestreams such as eagle-nest cameras can help bridge these gaps.

The researchers used this knowledge to design a program specific to assisted living around nature-focused livestreams. The program, called *RASCALs*, for Reinforcing and Advancing Social Connectedness in Assisted Living, was implemented in four separate assisted living houses and in one overall community and encompassed 21, 45- to 60-minute in-person sessions. In each session, residents viewed livestreams together, participated as a group in online discussion boards, and engaged in their own facilitator-led discussions.

FINDINGS

Participants showed significant improvement in “positive relations with others,” a measure of well-being that indicates a person feels they can maintain close relationships, spend time with others, and have warm and trusting relationships. Positive relations with others is critical for overall psychological well-being and may provide a foundation for strong social bonds within a community. These findings suggest that group engagement in nature-focused livestreams can deliver the prosocial benefits of nature.

The findings indicate that programs like *RASCALs* can foster social interaction, facilitate engagement, and support well-being, particularly for those with mobility or cognitive limitations who may have fewer opportunities to experience nature firsthand. By integrating technology-supported nature experiences, this study offers a scalable, cost-effective solution that enriches quality of life and aligns with person-centered care.

READ THE ABSTRACT

Mauldin, R. L., Westmore, M. R., Tulloh, A., & Anderson, K. A. (2024). Well-being outcomes from the delivery of *RASCALs*, a group activity intervention using nature-focused livestream broadcasts. *Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine*, 10, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23337214241273230>

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



It’s easy to adapt a *RASCALs*-style program in any community. Nature-focused livestreams are available to all and are typically free of charge. Experienced programming team members can create discussions around the viewing. The researchers offer additional suggestions related to the benefits of nature-focused livestreams for assisted living residents:

1. Consider adding an intergenerational component; invite family members or local schoolchildren to participate in your livestreaming sessions.
2. Nature-focused livestreams can also be displayed on screens in common areas for unstructured viewing experiences. This can bring relaxing scenes and sounds into a senior living community, creating opportunities to gather and discuss the natural world.
3. Residents with personal devices can access livestreams on their own. Team members can introduce residents to the experience, share information about websites, and provide assistance with accessing them (e.g., bookmarking web pages).

2025 SILVER AWARD RECIPIENTS



OPENING ADOLESCENTS' EYES TO AGEISM Teaching Teenagers to Help Combat Ageism with Social Media

Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel: Assaf Suberry; Sarit Okun; Liat Ayalon

FOCUS: Can age-appropriate education on ageism work?

Across societies, including Israel where this study was conducted, older persons face ageism. People tend to stereotype them as incompetent, forgetful, and helpless. This can harm the well-being, cognitive functioning, and longevity of older adults to the point where the reduction of ageism has been declared an important social endeavor by the World Health Organization.

Therefore, the researchers designed an educational intervention on the topic for children aged 11 to 15. Their innovative hour-and-a-half intervention aimed to combat ageism among adolescents through an active learning and creative advocacy workshop. They led 25 workshops for 318 sixth- to ninth-graders, where each workshop had 22 to 40 students.

The short, engaging workshop reframed ageism as a form of discrimination similar to racism, as well as enhanced understanding and promoted positive perceptions of older adults. Encouraging adolescents to create and share social media content—specifically memes—ensured that age-inclusive messages reach a broader audience. This approach not only challenges stereotypes early but also lays the foundation for future generations to support inclusive aging policies.

FINDINGS

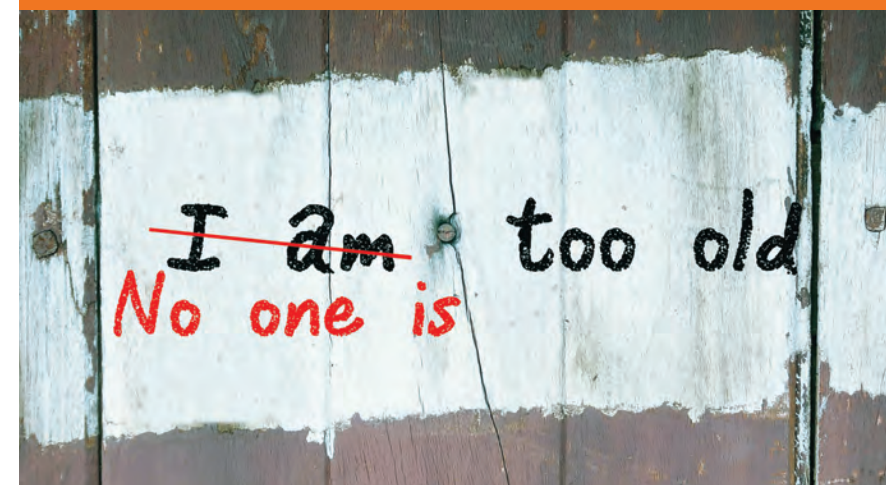
Results showed improved familiarity with the concept of *ageism*. Before the intervention, 92.9% of participants were unfamiliar with ageism; after the intervention, the landscape of familiarity shifted, with 74.4% of participants demonstrating full familiarity. Results showed improved attitudes toward older persons, with a medium effect size. The findings indicated a greater effectiveness of the intervention among females. Analysis of 274 memes created by the students showed that almost two-thirds of them aimed to address ageism toward older persons; 19% promoted an age-inclusive world; and 17% of the memes addressed ageism toward children and young persons.

“ This approach ... lays the foundation for future generations to support inclusive aging policies. ”

READ THE ABSTRACT

Suberry, A., Okun, S., Ayalon, L. (2024). Reducing ageism and enhancing social activism in middle school: The use of diverse measures of ageism. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/07334648241271930>

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



The workshop designed by the researchers focused on generating memes with positive messaging combatting ageism. Consider adopting this tool with or for the older adults you serve:

1. Partner with a local school or youth organization for an intergenerational project where younger people teach “meme skills” to older adults, and together they craft messages about positive aging.
2. Implement more in-depth programs where younger individuals create and share age-inclusive content, such as videos or testimonials from older adults.
3. Start your own anti-ageism meme workshop and add it to your creative arts offerings. Artwork with positive aging messages and images can be photographed and turned into memes.

For more information on this research, please contact Assaf Suberry at assaf.su@gmail.com.

ATTRACTING OLDER ADULTS TO PUBLIC PARKS Redesigning Green Spaces to Support Older Adults' Health

National Ageing Research Institute, Melbourne, Australia: Pazit Levinger; Bronwyn L. Dreher; Briony Dow; Frances Batchelor

Rehabilitation, Ageing and Independent Living (RAIL) Research Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia: Sze-Ee Soh; Keith D. Hill

FOCUS: Can we expand on local park offerings to serve older adults?

“...older adults are underrepresented among park users, partly due to parks prioritizing children's play areas...”

Local parks offer significant health benefits for people of all ages, including opportunities for physical, mental, and social well-being. However, older adults are underrepresented among park users, partly due to parks often prioritizing children's play areas over age-appropriate active spaces.

This study addressed this gap by evaluating the impact of installing “Seniors Exercise Parks” (specialized outdoor exercise equipment) and implementing capacity-building activities on increasing park visitation and physical activity among older adults. The findings demonstrated that such tailored interventions can effectively enhance park use and promote active lifestyles in this demographic.

The ENJOY MAP for HEALTH study used a quasi-experimental design to assess the impact of installing specialized equipment as part of park refurbishments in six municipalities across Victoria, Australia. The initiative was complemented by promotional efforts and community capacity-building

activities. Direct observations of park users and park audits were conducted prior to the upgrades, one month post-upgrade, and 12 months from baseline. These direct observations focused on the number and characteristics of park visitors, as well as the types and levels of physical activity performed.

FINDINGS

The results underscore the importance of integrating specialized infrastructure, capacity building, and targeted programming to create inclusive, age-friendly public spaces. Key findings include:

- A substantial increase in visitors age 60 and better, from 170 at baseline (4.5% of all park users) to 436 (8.2%) at 12 months.
- A significant rise in physical activity participation among older visitors, from 52.4% (89 individuals) at baseline to 63.5% (277 individuals) at follow-up.
- Organized programs and structured activities contributed to increased park visits, equipment use, and sustained physical activity participation.

The research offers practical, actionable strategies to enhance park design and promote physical activity among older adults, with a focus on scaling these approaches across parks and leisure operations in Australia.

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



For those interested in building their own park areas for older adults, the researchers share the following: The Seniors Exercise Park equipment is designed by a manufacturer in Finland, Lappset, to target functional movement, balance, mobility, and strength—essential for maintaining independence in later life. The physical activity program designed for use with the equipment was developed by the National Ageing Research Institute research team, including exercise physiologists and physiotherapists with expertise in older adults' physical activity needs. The program is grounded in over a decade of research demonstrating improvements in physical function, quality of life, and reduced falls.

The researchers advise that for those considering implementation, it's essential to think beyond infrastructure: True impact comes from upskilling older adults as peer leaders. This approach not only builds local capacity and ownership but also ensures the program remains active and sustainable. Empowering older people to lead and engage their community is key to long-term success.

READ THE ABSTRACT

Levinger, P., Dreher, B. L., Soh, S. E., Dow, B., Batchelor, F., & Hill, K. D. (2024). Results from the ENJOY MAP for HEALTH: a quasi-experiment evaluating the impact of age-friendly outdoor exercise equipment to increase older people's park visitations and physical activity. *BMC Public Health*, 24(1), 1663

MAXIMIZING COGNITIVE HEALTH WITH LEISURE TIME Examining Which Leisure Experiences Help Brains Age Well

Eastern Washington University: Karen Carnicello Wenzel, PhD

Clemson University: Marieke Van Puymbroeck; Ryan Gagnon; Stephen Lewis; Francis McGuire; Julie Vidotto

FOCUS: How can we direct older adults to beneficial hobbies and pursuits?

Leisure pursuits later in life can promote and protect cognitive health—but the benefits are associated not with specific activities such as crossword puzzles, but rather with how leisure is experienced. Older adults who engage in novel, complex, and/or challenging leisure pursuits seem to reap more benefits than those who participate in more passive entertainment, or in brain training games that have shown limited cognitive effects.

The researchers set up to pinpoint the unique attributes and characteristics of beneficial leisure pursuits by reviewing 65 research studies across 13 different countries.

FINDINGS

The research identified several key attributes of leisure engagement that are linked to cognitive health in aging. These included:

- **Frequency and intensity of engagement:** Nearly all of the articles reported a significant positive association between frequency of participation and cognition in aging, as well as a reduced risk of cognitive decline or

impairment. (Frequency is relative to the type of activity.) Intense, or cognitively demanding, activities also had a significant association with cognitive health.

- **The variety of activities:** Greater breadth of activity repertoire or higher number of different pursuits had a decreased risk of cognitive impairment, independent of the cognitive demand of the activity.
- **The amount of time spent on these activities:** All the studies concluded that sustained participation in leisure pursuits had a positive impact on cognition in aging.

The characteristics associated with cognitive benefits include the following:

- novelty
- active participation
- enjoyment
- meaningfulness
- self-direction

“Older adults who engage in novel, complex, and/or challenging leisure pursuits seem to reap more benefits...”

READ THE ABSTRACT

Wenzel, K. C., Van Puymbroeck, M., Gagnon, R., Lewis, S., McGuire, F., Vidotto, J. (2024) The attributes and characteristics of leisure activity engagement that foster cognition in aging: A scoping review. *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement* (2024) 8: 118-154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41465-024-00286-1>

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE

The researchers recommend steps for senior living communities to translate these findings into practice:

- **Start with individualized assessments:** Partner with qualified recreational therapists to assess each resident’s interests, abilities, past experiences, and motivations. Understanding what feels personally meaningful is key to fostering long-term engagement.
- **Offer a broad, rotating menu of programs:** Include options that span all domains—physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual.
- **Prioritize novelty and spontaneity:** Incorporate mystery events, surprise guests, and spontaneous outings. Elements of unpredictability can re-engage curiosity and support brain health.
- **Reduce reliance on passive entertainment:** While movies and TV have their place, active participation—such as group discussions and hands-on workshops—should be the norm.
- **Encourage lifelong learning:** Provide opportunities for residents to learn new skills or revisit old interests.
- **Foster self-direction:** Give residents a meaningful voice in shaping activities through regular feedback sessions, surveys, or a resident council.

SUPPORTING GEROTRASCENDENCE IN OLDER ADULTS Understanding the Natural Shift in Mindset with Age

O.P. Jindal Global University (Sonipat), India: Shilpa Bandyopadhyay
Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT Delhi), New Delhi, India: Kamlesh Singh

FOCUS: Should we shift focus from program engagement to self-reflection?

Gerotranscendence is a theory that older adults undergo a natural shift in mindset, from viewing the world in a materialistic and rational way to a more cosmic, transcendental one—which increases their life satisfaction.

The researchers believed that understanding gerotranscendence offers a holistic approach to aging and is crucial for promoting older adults' well-being and dignity. Their study explored the psychological and behavioral changes experienced by older adults in India through the lens of gerotranscendence. By examining shifts in self-perception, social relationships, and attitudes toward life and death, it challenged the prevalent stereotypes of aging as mere decline. This study is particularly significant as it highlights the process of meaning-making in later life, offering insights for geriatric care and counseling.

A total of 219 participants (60 to 93 years) were surveyed, and 39 of them participated in in-depth, one-to-one interviews. The sample included both community-dwelling older adults and residents of senior living communities.

FINDINGS

The study found strong evidence of gerotranscendence among older adults in India, with cosmic transcendence—or a deeper connection to nature, humanity, and life's meaning—being the most prominent aspect. Quantitative findings showed the highest scores for cosmic transcendence, followed by solitude and self-transcendence. Qualitative insights reinforced this, as many participants reported a deeper connection with the universe, reduced fear of death, and increased appreciation for simple joys.

Participants also reported greater self-reflection, increased acceptance of aging, and a declining attachment to materialism. They prioritized meaningful relationships over superficial connections, with some seeking solitude. The findings emphasized aging as a period of growth, wisdom, and transcendence.

“For senior living providers, this indicates a need to change standard perceptions...”

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE

Consider what this study reveals about gerotranscendence as a natural, positive developmental phase for many older adults. For senior living providers, this indicates a need to change standard perceptions:

- Note that some of the signs of gerotranscendence are often confused with depression or dementia. Don't jump to conclusions.
- Recognize that self-reflection, solitude, and spiritual growth are natural pursuits, and should be encouraged. Rather than encouraging program participation by all older adults, support the desire to be contemplative and solitary. Offer spaces for quiet reflection and meditation.
- Integrate elements of life review, meditation, and existential discussions into programs, and create environments that foster wisdom, personal growth, and fulfillment. Offer philosophical discussions, spiritual retreats, and nature-based activities.
- Reminiscence therapy, journaling, and (intergenerational) storytelling sessions can help in meaning-making.
- Train team members to be comfortable with listening to residents' spiritual beliefs and thoughts on mortality.

READ THE ABSTRACT

Bandyopadhyay, S., & Singh, K. (2024). The experience of gerotranscendence in the Indian context. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528030.2024.2386263>

2025 BRONZE AWARD RECIPIENTS



2025 BRONZE AWARD
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BRIDGING CULTURAL AND TECHNOLOGY GAPS WITH ROBOTS

Improving Immigrants' Health Care with Socially Assistive Robots

University of North Carolina Charlotte: Othelia EunYoung Lee
Korean Community Services of Metropolitan New York: Kwi Ok Nah; Eun Mi Kim
The University of Texas at Austin, TX: Namkee G. Choi
Kookmin University, Seoul, Republic of Korea: Do-Hyung Park

FOCUS: Can robots help older immigrants age in place?

“After the study, participants took their medication more regularly and felt less depressed.”

due to a combination of factors, including limited English proficiency and health literacy, and a lack of familiarity with the U.S. health care system. Besides language barriers, they might not have the tech skills, devices, or reliable internet needed for online social interactions.

This study looked into whether a socially assistive robot (SAR) could improve the health and emotional well-being of these older adults and whether they would be open to using the robot.

A total of 30 participants (age 65+) in a large metropolitan area participated in the study, and each was provided a SAR named Hyodol for four months, interacting with it in ways that they saw appropriate. Hyodol is designed to relay vital health information, play melodies, trigger reminiscences, share inspirational quotes, and narrate captivating stories.

Korean American immigrant older adults can experience increased social isolation and poorer behavioral health outcomes. This is likely

The researchers used a pre- and post-test design to assess changes between baseline and follow-up in medication adherence, depressive symptoms, loneliness, and disability. They also used in-depth qualitative interviews.

FINDINGS

Interviews revealed that participants enjoyed the companionship and health reminders from the robot doll. Hyodol was usable even for those with limited tech skills.

After the study, participants took their medication more regularly and felt less depressed. Many pretended to have conversations with Hyodol, though it wasn't designed for two-way chats. This personification helped them bond with the robot. Loneliness scores dropped slightly but not significantly, and there was no change in functional disability levels. Many participants liked Hyodol; others said it was like “my friends” or “a grandchild,” sang along with it, listened to religious passages, or played with it to reduce boredom.

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



The findings suggest that SARs can complement human services and improve care for older adults, especially for socially isolated immigrants who lack access to community services and support. Some examples:

- The robots can motivate users to engage in physical activities and adopt healthy habits.
- Daily reminders for waking up and mealtimes can help those with sleep and eating issues establish regular routines.

It's crucial to listen to the experiences, needs, and preferences of older adults and incorporate these insights into robot-assisted care. This approach can empower older adults to better manage their health care and social needs. While SARs can address the social and emotional needs of isolated older adults, more research is needed to understand cultural differences. These robots should be customized to fit the cultural backgrounds of older immigrants.

READ THE ABSTRACT

Lee, O. E., Nah, K., Kim, E. Choi, N. G., & Park, D. (2024). Exploring the use of socially assistive robots among socially isolated Korean American older adults. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*. 43(9), 1295–1304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07334648241236081>

2025 BRONZE AWARD
RECIPIENT

COMBATING AGEISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Using Hashtags to Reveal Trends in Online Ageism

National University of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy: Reuben Ng, PhD
Canary Intelligence and Analytics: Nicole Indran, BSocSci (Hons); Luyao Liu, MSc

FOCUS: Can we harness social media to spark positive conversations about aging?

While racism and sexism have sparked widespread public discourse and advocacy, discussions on ageism remain comparatively scarce. This study provided empirical evidence that ageism is significantly under-discussed on social media, relative to sexism and racism. This lack of attention reinforces the invisibility of ageism and hinders efforts to tackle it. By identifying this gap in public discourse, this study highlighted the urgent need for targeted initiatives to raise awareness and actively combat ageism.

Hashtags related to racism and sexism were extracted from past scholarship, and the researchers employed a snowball sampling method, using X/Twitter's search function to query hashtags used by advocacy groups and compile other relevant hashtags. The 154,353,047 posts collected spanned 15 years, from August 23, 2007, to December 31, 2022.

FINDINGS

During the 15-year time span, ageism-related hashtags were used 60 times less than racism-related hashtags and 24 times less than sexism-related hashtags. There was a statistically significant upward trend in ageism-related tweets during the time frame, indicating growing awareness; however, this occurred at a much slower rate than other forms of inequality.

Incidents of racism and sexism during the study's time frame often generated widespread public outrage. Conversely, instances of ageism rarely caused spikes in social media activity. Rather, these spikes were mainly observed during events such as the release of a report on ageism, a conference related to aging, or observances like the International Day of Older Persons.

“ Instances of ageism rarely caused spikes in social media activity. ”

READ THE ABSTRACT

Ng, R., Indran, N., & Liu, L. (2024). Social media discourse on ageism, sexism, and racism: Analysis of 150 million tweets over 15 years. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 72(10), 3149–3155. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.19047>

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE

It is essential for industry professionals to collaborate with advocacy groups and influencers to initiate conversations on ageism. Some ways to get started:

- Engage older adults who have strong online followings, and encourage them to share their experiences through blogs, social media, or podcasts to further normalize discussions.
- Integrate the topic of ageism into everyday community engagement. Intergenerational programs, storytelling initiatives, and public awareness campaigns can foster ongoing dialog.
- Partner with filmmakers, writers, and journalists to promote accurate representations of aging in movies, television, and news coverage to boost positive depictions of aging.
- Embed ageism-related education into staff orientations and trainings. Help employees recognize and challenge ageist biases.
- Engage in community-based activism—in the form of grassroots movements, age-positive public events, and engagement in policy advocacy at local levels—to push ageism to the forefront of public discourse.

2025 BRONZE AWARD
RECIPIENT

REVEALING DISPARITIES IN NAVIGATING COGNITIVE DECLINE

Identifying Gaps in Social Services for Sexual Minority Older Adults with Cognitive Issues

University of Illinois Chicago: Nathaniel M. Tran

Vanderbilt University: Tara McKay; Gilbert Gonzales; Stacie B. Dusetzina; Carrie Fry

FOCUS: How can we better serve LGBTQ+ older adults experiencing cognitive decline?

“Ensuring LGBTQ+ clients feel safe in their homes is foundational to person-centered care.”

sexual identities) older adults compared to their heterosexual peers? Researchers set out to answer this question, and to compare whether sexual minority older adults and heterosexual adults are able to access home- and community-based services to live independently despite cognitive health problems.

Because sexual minority older adults are less likely to be married or have children, they have less access to these typical sources for help with navigating independent living disabilities. This research helped to understand how often LGBTQ+ older adults might need home- and community-based services for their cognitive health problems but aren't receiving the services.

Are there differences in how often and how severely cognitive decline impacts sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other non-hetero-

Researchers used data from 27 states representing 15 million people ages 45+ from 2015–19 to compare prevalence of, severity of, and support for cognitive decline between groups of sexual minority and heterosexual older adults. All respondents were born before 1974, meaning they came of legal age for marriage and adoption before these legal rights were available to sexual minority adults. This helped researchers understand how historical policy environments impact current-day health challenges for LGBTQ+ older adults.

FINDINGS

The researchers found that sexual minority older adults were more likely to report cognitive decline than their heterosexual peers, and that declines were more severe for sexual minority individuals, including impairing their ability to live independently.

Despite higher impairments, 28% of sexual minority women did not get any social support for cognitive decline-related impairments (compared to 12% of heterosexual women); rates of unmet need were similar for sexual minority men compared to heterosexual men (16% versus 14%, respectively.)

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE



The researchers stress that LGBTQ+ older adults are less likely to have support from a spouse or children, making them more reliant on formal care systems that weren't designed with their identities in mind. Aging services providers must proactively assess for unmet needs and avoid assumptions about family support.

One path forward is to partner with LGBTQ+ community centers and advocacy organizations to expand outreach and build trust. Resources such as SAGECare's LGBTQ+ aging cultural competency training and the National Resource Center on LGBTQ+ Aging offer practical guidance.

Respect in the home is critical. Home-based providers must recognize that entering someone's space requires both clinical skills as well as dignity and respect. Ensuring LGBTQ+ clients feel safe in their homes is foundational to person-centered care.

READ THE ABSTRACT

Tran, N. M., McKay, T., Gonzales, G., Dusetzina, S. B., & Fry, C. (2024). Aging in isolation: Sexual orientation differences in navigating cognitive decline. *SSM-Population Health*, 27, 101699.

ADJUSTING THE TEMPERATURE TO IMPROVE ATTENTION

Finding Optimal Ambient Temperatures for Older Adults' Cognitive Function

Harvard Medical School and Hinda and Arthur Marcus Institute on Aging Research: Amir Baniassadi, PhD; Thomas Trivison, PhD; Lewis Lipsitz, MD; Brad Manor, PhD
Marcus Hinda and Arthur Institute for Aging Research, Boston, MA: Wanting Yu; Ryan Day, BSc

FOCUS: Can we focus on ambient room temperature to boost resident cognition?

Thermostat settings matter, not just for physical comfort, but also for basic cognitive function. This study addressed how home ambient temperature affects the ability of older adults to maintain attention during daily activities. This issue is important because older adults, many of whom experience cognitive difficulties, are particularly vulnerable to temperature variations due to physiological changes, medications, and chronic conditions commonly associated with aging. Meanwhile, cognitive functioning is essential for maintaining independence and quality of life, yet suboptimal indoor temperatures can negatively impact these abilities.

The researchers conducted an observational study involving 47 community-dwelling older adults (average age 79) in Boston. Participants lived independently and completed smartphone-based surveys twice daily for up to 12 months, reporting their perceived attention and thermal comfort. Simultaneously, the researchers continuously monitored their home ambient temperature and humidity using smart sensors placed in frequently used

living areas. Data from surveys and sensors were synchronized to examine relationships between temperature and self-reported difficulty maintaining attention. Participants underwent baseline cognitive and health assessments.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed a U-shaped relationship between home ambient temperature and older adults' self-reported difficulty maintaining attention. Specifically, attention was optimal at temperatures between 20°C (68°F) and 24°C (75.2°F) and worsened significantly outside this range, with the odds of attention difficulty doubling with just a 4°C shift in either direction. Subjective thermal sensations mirrored this pattern, with both feeling “too cold” or “too hot” linked to increased attention difficulties. These results highlighted that even moderate deviations from optimal indoor temperatures significantly impact cognitive function, emphasizing the importance of maintaining home environments that support cognitive health among older adults.

“Even moderate deviations from optimal indoor temperatures significantly impact cognitive function.”

READ THE ABSTRACT

Baniassadi, A., Yu, W., Trivison, T., Day, R., Lipsitz, L., & Manor, B. (2024). Home ambient temperature and self-reported attention in community-dwelling older adults. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, glae286.

FROM RESEARCH TO REAL LIFE

The researchers recommend several practical strategies for senior living and aging services professionals:

- Understand that even modest deviations from optimal range of 20 to 24°C (68 to 75.2°F) can substantially impair attention.
- Consider adopting smart-home technologies, such as remote-controlled thermostats or automated temperature-regulation systems to help maintain temperatures. These technologies can continuously monitor and maintain optimal temperatures without requiring active management by older adults, thus improving comfort and cognitive health, especially for individuals with cognitive impairment or limited mobility.
- Develop targeted educational programs to increase awareness among caregivers, managers, and residents regarding the importance of indoor thermal conditions. Train staff to identify signs of thermal discomfort in older adults, especially among those unable to communicate effectively.
- Integrate routine assessments of both subjective comfort and objective ambient temperatures into standard care practices.

SUBMIT YOUR RESEARCH FOR NEXT YEAR'S INNOVATIVE RESEARCH ON AGING AWARDS.

The call for submissions will open in February 2026.
For details, visit matherinstitute.com.

Staffed by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, Mather Institute is an award-winning resource for research and information about wellness, aging, trends in senior living, and successful industry innovations. The Institute conducts cutting-edge research, often in collaboration with leading universities, with the goal of informing, innovating, and inspiring. Mather Institute is part of Mather, an 80+-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating Ways to Age Well.SM