



## An Overview of Self-Determination in Supporting Healthy Aging in Older Adults: A Narrative Review

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The concept of healthy aging is strongly connected to self-determination theory, with older individuals engaging their sense of autonomy, skills, and social bonds to improve their overall quality of life. **Aims:** This review aims to determine the picture of self-determination in the older adults. **Methods:** Seven relevant study articles between 2011-2024 from PubMed, SpringerLink and BMC Geriatric were thematically review. **Results:** Self-determination in older adults, which includes autonomy, competence, and social connectedness, can decline due to factors such as physical frailty, cognitive impairment, and reliance on assistance. Intrinsic motivation and the fulfillment of psychological needs are key drivers in encouraging active participation of older adults in various activities. Beyond supporting independence, self-determination also directly enhances the physical, emotional, and social quality of life in older adults. **Conclusions:** Physical frailty, worsening health conditions, and cognitive decline may lead to a decrease in self-determination among older adults, yet their intrinsic motivation still plays a crucial role in driving active engagement. Recognizing these factors is vital for creating interventions that promote autonomy and enhance the overall well-being of elderly individuals.

### KEYWORDS

Self-determination, Older adults, Healthy aging

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## 1. BACKGROUND

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), by 2030, one in six people worldwide will be aged 60 years or older. It is estimated that the population of older adults will increase from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion in 2030. By 2050, this population is projected to double to 2.1 billion. Furthermore, the population aged 80 years and older is expected to triple

between 2020 and 2025, reaching 426 million people (Noto, 2023).

For geriatric nurses, the challenge in elderly care lies in providing nursing interventions aimed at promoting wellness across diverse conditions and backgrounds of older adults in order to achieve successful aging. According to Boyle et al. (2009), several studies have found that having a sense of purpose in life is an important

aspect of successful aging (Miller, 2012). Successful aging is defined as a lower likelihood of disease and disability, the maintenance of high cognitive and physical functioning, and active engagement in life (Teater & Chonody, 2020).

One theory that correlates with successful aging is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Based on the SDT framework, healthy aging is viewed as self-empowerment, whereby older adults are encouraged to take control of their lives for as long as possible. SDT posits three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ng & Ho, 2020). Self-determination is also defined as a process that refers to an individual's capacity to make independent decisions (Bölenius et al., 2023).

Self-Determination Theory is also aligned with Continuity Theory Robert (1989), which states that quality of life in older adults can be achieved when they continue to maintain roles. These roles may change with age but do not lose their meaning in relation to the self, social relationships, and the environment (Atchley, 1989). The connection with Self-Determination Theory is that older adults maintain autonomy in performing the roles they choose.

Self-determination theory can be applied in the context of healthy aging, linking older adults' ability to determine their own fate as a positive contributor to life satisfaction. Feeling satisfied with life can be seen as how individuals interpret their own quality of life as they age. This study aims to review research discussing the concept of self-determination in older adults (Ng & Ho, 2020).

## **2. METHODS**

This review is a narrative review or traditional review, in which the researcher searches for articles relevant to the selected topic based on the research question to understand the current knowledge from a specific perspective (Lau & Kuziemy, 2016). The research question in this study is: "What is the influence of self-determination on older adults?" The article search was conducted through the PubMed, SpringerLink, and BMC Geriatrics databases using the keywords "self-determination AND elderly OR older adults." The selected articles were published between 2011 and 2024. These articles were then reviewed to construct categorize themes. This review study was not subject to ethical approval, as it did not involve direct respondents in data

collection; instead, data were obtained from already published articles.

### 3. Results

In this review, there are seven relevant studies published between 2011 and 2024. These studies consist of various research designs, including non-experimental quantitative studies, descriptive qualitative studies, and randomized controlled trials (RCTs). The study samples range from 21 to 456 elderly participants, with average ages from 60 years to over 86 years.

Several studies highlight the importance of older adults' intrinsic motivation, such as the desire to maintain health and slow the aging process, which is

closely related to the self-determination needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Other studies identify factors influencing self-determination in older adults, such as education level, health status, and support from home care services.

The review results are summarized in Table 1. The themes from the reviewed articles are categorized based on similarities, including: 1) Determinant factors of self-determination, 2) Older adults' participation motivation and self-determination needs, 3) The influence of cognitive function on self-determination, and 4) The relationship between self-determination and quality of

Table 1. Summary

#	Author (year)	Research Purposes	Design	Sample (n)	Instrument(s)	Prevalence / Main outcome	Theme
1	(Pynnönen et al., 2023)	To explore changes in activity levels	A two-arm single-blinded randomized control trial	101 (75 - 80 years old individual)	University of Jyväskylä Active Aging Scale (UJACAS) activity sub-score; Health Climate Questionnaire; Self-Regulation Questionnaire	Autonomous motivation and attitudes as influential change constructs in the change of activity frequency	Autonomous motivation influence activity frequency
2	(Dattilo et al., 2018)	to understand the challenges of aging, adaptation, and leisure in community-dwelling older adults	A qualitative descriptive study	21 (mean age 71.3 years old)	Audio-recording device; transcriber 1.5	Older adults emphasized the need for self-determination (autonomy: the ability to make their own decisions; competence: sharing experiences	Fulfilling self-determination needs amid challenges and adaptation through social and recreational engagement

					with others; and relatedness: participating in classes and social groups). In achieving self-determination, older adults face various challenges, but they have adaptation strategies and engage in recreational activities to fulfill these needs.		
3	(Ferrand et al., 2014)	To examine the satisfaction of psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) of elderly residents in nursing homes in relation to welfare indicators	A quantitative non-experimental design with correlational comparative approaches	100 (mean age: 86.7 years old)	autonomy, questionnaire by (Standage et al., 2003), the competence subscale of the intrinsic motivation inventory (IMI), the need for relatedness scale (NRS); Psychological Well-Being scales; geriatric depression scale; a questionnaire for gather demographic data	High satisfaction of psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) has a significant impact on a strong sense of purpose in life and personal growth. Satisfaction of autonomy and relatedness needs correlates with purpose in life, and satisfaction of relatedness needs is significantly positively correlated with personal growth.	The influence of psychological needs satisfaction on Life purposes and personal growth
4	(Ottenvall Hammar et al., 2016)	Investigating the determining factors of self-determination in community-dwelling older adults	A cross-sectional study	456 (age 80 years old or older)	The impact on Participation and Autonomy-Older persons (IPA-O) for asses the self-assessment statement	Five significant factors associated with reduced self-determination are: high education, frailty, poor self-rated health,	Determinant factors of Reduced self-determination in older adults

					dissatisfaction with physical health, and receiving help from public homecare services.		
5	(Haynes et al., 2021)	To explores the reasons participant enrolled in the CHAnGE (Coaching for Healthy Ageing) trial and how recruitment strategies influenced their decisions	A qualitative study	32 (age 60 years old or older)	Audio recording device	The main motivations for participation are health, slower aging, altruism, and curiosity, which are closely related to the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.	Motivation for participating aligned with psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness
6	(Bölenius et al., 2019)	To explore perceptions of self-determination among older adults receiving home care services and to examine its relationship with quality of life	A cross-sectional study	134 (age≥65 years old)	questionnaires, Impact on Participation and Autonomy, the Nottingham Health Profile, and the EQ-5D-5L.	The majority of older adults receiving support from home care services feel a sense of self-determination, especially in the areas of time use and self-care. However, there is considerable variation in the self-determination experienced by older adults across different dimensions (use of time, self-care, mobility, social relationships, living as they wish, activities in and around the house, providing help and support for others). The study results also show that older adults with higher self-	Variation in self-determination among older adults receiving home care services

					determination tend to report better quality of life.	
7	(Andersson Hammar et al., 2024)	To investigate the correlation between self-determination and cognitive function in frail elderly individuals	A cross-sectional secondary data analysis	119 (age ≥years old)	the Impact on Participation and Autonomy-Older persons (IPA-O), Mini Mental State Examination (MMSE)	Self-determination is experienced by all older adults regardless of cognitive function. However, there is a risk of decreased self-determination in older adults with significant cognitive decline, particularly in activities related to self-care and social relationships.

**Determinant factors of self-determination**

Self-determination among older adults encompasses their sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in navigating daily life. Under certain circumstances, this self-determination may diminish. Contributing factors to a decline in self-determination include higher levels of education, frailty, poor self-perceived health, dissatisfaction with physical well-being, dependence on home care services, and cognitive impairment.

**Older adults’ participation motivation and self-determination needs**

Older adults’ participation in activities is driven by their desire to maintain health,

slow the aging process, as well as by curiosity and altruism. Additionally, intrinsic motivation—along with the desire to remain purposeful, competent, and socially connected—encourages their engagement in various activities. In other words, the fulfilment of psychological needs, or self-determination, plays a significant role in enhancing older adults’ motivation to actively participate in their daily lives.

**The influence of cognitive function on self-determination**

Cognitive function plays an important role in maintaining self-determination among older adults, particularly in carrying out daily activities and making independent

decisions. While older adults with cognitive decline may still experience a sense of self-determination, there is a potential risk of reduced self-determination, especially in activities related to self-care and social relationships.

### **The relationship between self-determination and quality of life**

Self-determination not only contributes to the development of independence among older adults but also has a direct impact on improving their quality of life. Older adults with greater autonomy and control over their lives tend to have a more positive perception of their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

The discussion of the concept of self-determination among older adults plays a crucial role in supporting healthy aging and improving their quality of life. Existing research indicates that older adults' ability to maintain autonomy, a sense of competence, and social connectedness not only fosters greater independence but also positively influences their physical, emotional, and social well-being. However, several challenges such as cognitive decline, deteriorating health conditions, and reliance

on external assistance can hinder the preservation of self-determination. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the factors affecting self-determination is essential to develop effective interventions that support older adults in remaining active and finding meaning in their lives.

Self-determination, encompassing autonomy, competence, and social relatedness, serves as a fundamental pillar in supporting healthy and meaningful aging among older adults. The ability of individuals to make their own decisions, feel competent in their activities, and maintain social connections helps older adults preserve their independence and enhance their quality of life. Previous studies have demonstrated that older adults with higher levels of self-determination tend to be more socially active and better able to maintain self-care functions, which significantly improves their physical and emotional well-being ([Deci & Ryan, 2008](#); [Ferrand et al., 2014](#)).

Several factors can influence the capacity for self-determination in older adults. Physical frailty, declining health, reliance on home care services, and cognitive impairment are major barriers that can diminish the sense of control and independence among the elderly ([Ottenvall](#)

Hammar et al., 2016; Andersson Hammar et al., 2024). Interestingly, higher education levels have also been identified as a factor that, in certain contexts, may reduce self-determination, highlighting the need for further research to better understand this dynamic. These factors underscore the importance of personalized and adaptive approaches to support the psychological needs of older adults so they can continue to feel empowered in their daily lives.

Recent findings suggest that older adults' motivations are diverse and influenced by individual characteristics such as age, educational attainment, cognitive status, and prior life experiences. Many older individuals are driven by a desire to maintain brain health, contribute to scientific progress, or simply to pursue enjoyable and meaningful experiences (Carr et al., 2022). The study identified several motivation typologies, including "brain health advocates," "research helpers," "fun seekers," and "multiple motivation enthusiasts," which highlight the multidimensional and complex nature of older adults' intrinsic motivations.

This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which emphasizes that fulfilling core psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and

relatedness—can foster sustained and meaningful motivation. In the context of aging, activities that align with personal values and intrinsic goals are more likely to maintain consistent engagement. For instance, older adults with mild cognitive concerns may be motivated to participate in cognitive-enhancing activities to preserve their mental acuity, while others may be more inclined toward altruistic pursuits or driven by curiosity and a desire for continued learning. This diversity underscores the importance of adopting a personalized and empathetic approach in the development of programs aimed at supporting older adults' active involvement.

By understanding the multifaceted reasons behind older adults' participation, we can design interventions that are not only more effective but also more compassionate. Programs that honor the values, preferences, and psychological needs of older individuals are more likely to foster a sense of appreciation, satisfaction, and purpose ultimately contributing to an improved quality of life in later years.

Engagement in social and recreational activities not only fulfills basic psychological needs such as autonomy and relatedness but also significantly contributes to overall perceptions of quality of life (Bölenius et al.,

2019). Therefore, geriatric nursing practice should prioritize self-determination in interventions by empowering older adults through education, involvement in decision-making, and specialized training for healthcare providers to support the independence of older adults, including those with cognitive and physical limitations. Further research, particularly within non-Western cultural contexts and utilizing longitudinal designs, is essential to deepen understanding of the long-term impact of self-determination on the quality of life of older adults.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Self-determination plays a pivotal role in promoting healthy aging among older adults by supporting their autonomy, competence, and social connectedness three core psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory. While factors such as physical frailty, cognitive decline, poor health status, and dependence on care services can diminish self-determination, intrinsic motivation remains a powerful driver of active engagement in daily life. The reviewed evidence consistently demonstrates that higher levels of self-determination are closely linked to enhanced physical, emotional, and social

well-being, ultimately contributing to a better quality of life in later years. Therefore, healthcare interventions particularly in geriatric nursing should prioritize strategies that uphold and strengthen older adults' sense of control, purpose, and connection. Future research should explore these dynamics in diverse cultural contexts and through longitudinal designs to further inform person-centered approaches that empower older individuals to age with dignity and meaning.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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## **DATA AVAILABILITY**

Supplemental data will be provided upon request.

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