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**RÉSUMÉ**

Cet ouvrage, qui s’adrese aux personnes âgées, presente un programme favorisant le fonctionnement mental optimal. Parmi les sujets abordes on retrouve l’instauration d’objectifs, la pensee constructive, la creativite, l’apprentissage et la memoire, et l’affirmation de ses opinions. En general, il promeut une disposition de vie caracterisee par l’optimisme, la flexibilite mentale, la confiance en soi, et l’humour. Ce livre communique son message avec enthousiasme et dans un langage accessible au grand public. De nombreux exemples, des citations de meme que des exercises stimulants facilitent la progression dans le programme et l’application des conseils formules. Meme s’il contient quelques simplifications et exagerations, ce livre est fortement recommande non seulement pour les personnes agees mais aussi pour les educateurs, les professionnels de la sante, et les etudiants de toutes les disciplines de la gerontologie.

Have you already tried to find a source presenting in plain language how to teach older adults ways of changing negative attitudes and beliefs about older age, how to fight the myths and stereotypes of aging? Have you ever searched for practical means to counterbalance these negative views of later life that surreptitiously sneak into your own minds in your daily work as a healthcare worker or educator? If you answer “Yes”, look no further; this morale-boosting book is for you.

The objective of the book, primarily targeted at a readership of older adults, is to teach how to maintain an active brain by following a few key principles of healthy mental functioning. The authors adopt the analogy of physical fitness in proposing a seven-step program that covers goal setting, power thinking, creativity, learning and memory, speaking your mind, and generally fostering a positive mental attitude, characterized by optimism, mental flexibility, confidence, and, last but not least, humour. Clearly, a program valid for all ages but taking on particular relevance in later life, precisely because of the pervasiveness and persistence of negative beliefs and thoughts about mental functioning (and also anxious concerns one may add), which lead to fluctuating motivation, low activity, and premature discouragement. The authors supplement their clear description and justification of the proposed steps with numerous practical suggestions in the form of assigned practical exercises and challenging “brain teasers”, a unique feature of the book that enhances the pleasure of reading. Exhortative messages in the tradition of “the power of positive thinking” are exemplified by many motivating quotes and citations in the margins of the pages.

The program laid down in this book was tested and refined in the context of mental-fitness workshops conducted by the authors in community seniors’ centres on the west coast of Canada. The program is, therefore, anchored in practical experience as well as in research; that is tangible in the vividness of the examples and vignettes provided in the various chapters as well as in the passionate tone of the book. This volume succeeds in translating knowledge obtained through research into practical advice, using a language accessible to many, a remarkable achievement indeed.

The main thrust of the book is a crusade against negative attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts about aging and later life – definitely a major undertaking, given that negative myths about and stereotypes of aging are pervasive and deeply embedded in our society and in the minds of older adults themselves. To face this challenge directly, the authors endorse an utterly optimistic view concerning possibilities of change in mental functioning in older age. They espouse the view that decline is largely “in the person’s head” and that it is within the power of each individual to
reverse the movement. Certainly, gerontological research supports the view that stimulation and challenge, and consequently a capacity to take risk and maintain effort, are vital for maintaining good cognitive functioning in later life and that negative attitudes and beliefs constitute major impediments to this endeavour (e.g., Cappeliez & Aguerre, 2004). All gerontologists will concur with the authors on the crucial importance of a sense of meaning and purpose in life as vectors of mental health and on the need to develop skills and resources to achieve them (e.g., Pinquart, 2002; Reker, 2002). Also, the emphasis on optimism is well taken, as we know that this personality characteristic is linked with improved subjective well-being and good health (e.g., Wrosch & Scheier, 2003). Moreover, empirical findings and gerontological theories underline that the ability to adjust goals is associated with a better quality of life, thus amply supporting the importance the authors attach to goal setting in their mental-fitness program (e.g., Brandtstädtter & Rothermund, 2002; Worsch & Scheier, 2003).

Of necessity, research findings are simplified and conclusions are generalized in a book with an educational purpose, designed for the general public. And so, carried away by their enthusiasm for the cause, the authors at times lack nuance in representing research and gloss over several relevant issues. For instance, I wonder how my colleagues in memory research will react to a presentation of memory deficits in older age as a matter just of speed of response and of the meaningfulness of the task (27, 177). In the same vein, I am concerned about the average reader’s understanding of bold, unqualified statements, such as “Learning is possible at every age” or “Mental decline from disuse can be reversed with a short training program” (96–97). Colleagues in the personality domain might also question the extent to which optimism can truly be learned, as it is probably a long-standing and stable personality disposition (O'Rourke, 2002). They will also note that individuals will be differentially responsive to the calls expressed in step 3 (pursuit of creative endeavours), depending on where they stand on the personality trait of openness to experience.

Recently, voices have been heard in gerontology calling attention to the particular challenges of advanced old age (Baltes & Smith, 2003). The fourth age entails a level of vulnerability – including serious threats to identity, psychological autonomy, and sense of control – a picture that stands in stark contrast to the positive views on which the current book focuses exclusively. But then again, the book is focusing on adults in their third age (young-old). Longitudinal research will tell us to what extent applications of their program and similar efforts can change a rather bleak picture for coming generations of very old persons.

The book makes little reference to physical activity in relation to mental fitness. Yet optimal functioning of brain and body go together, as the authors themselves point out: “mens sana in corpore sano”. Mention of spirituality would have been welcome in step 1, in the sections devoted to finding purpose, as it represents a major avenue for many persons. The influence of society on the maintenance of negative views of aging and older persons is a notion conspicuously absent from the book. In step 6, “Speaking Your Mind”, the authors propose to set up a salon or philosopher’s café as a context for promoting discussions and exchanges. This would be an excellent context for debating this topic and planning action.

In brief, this book presents a series of common sense principles of good mental hygiene. Intended primarily for older adults, it also contains valuable lessons for individuals of all ages. Despite some instances of overstatement, I would also recommend this powerful antidote to negative views of aging to educators, healthcare workers, and students in all disciplines of gerontology. They will turn its last page feeling uplifted and empowered.

**References**


