



# Listen, talk, understand. Interpersonal communication in a senior project<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Studies carried out around the world on the structure of human populations clearly indicate that modern society is “aging”. Demographic indicators show the dynamism of this process, and thus the trend of population ageing will intensify in the coming years. That is why the activation and activity of older people is so important, this is a condition for functioning in society, playing assigned social roles, meeting bio-psychosocial needs and, above all, communicating. Its absence can cause progressive disability, social isolation, loneliness. That is why activating senior projects aimed at increasing independence and counteracting the risk of social marginalization are so important in the lives of seniors. The aim of the research was to establish the factors that determine proper communication with the elderly people. The study involved 86 seniors, participants of the senior project entitled: “Passion – a recipe for eternal youth”. A qualitative strategy was used to collect and analyze the data using partially categorized interviews. In order to supplement the information obtained during the interviews, an analysis of the documents held by the senior project organizer was carried out. The presentation of the results of the study was divided into three areas related to communication: listening, talking, understanding. In order to build effective interpersonal communication with seniors, it is important to understand individual experiences, specific needs, expectations and concerns. For seniors in the process of interpersonal communication important elements are: empathy, patience, commitment, as well as understanding their shortcomings related to the aging process. The openness of expressing desires and needs by seniors is fostered by appreciation and listening. In their family environment, they notice a deficit in the area of active listening, as well as the infantilization of the message addressed to them. They emphasize the very important importance of communication in their lives, and identify its lack with loneliness and isolation. They believe that the activity they undertake in the auditory, motor and cognitive spheres affects the slowing down of the aging process, as well as helps in communication. Taking into account the results of the study, it should be proposed to increase the awareness of people working in senior projects on the specifics of interpersonal communication with seniors through the organization of educational trainings in this area, which should be reflected in legal regulations.

**Keywords:** activity, communication, senior, social exclusion

## 1. Theoretical introduction to the original research

Ageing and old age are terms that are interpreted and approached in various ways, and have various meanings. No single point in time where they start can be identified. The literature mentions many factors that contribute to the periodisation of old age, including the starting criterion, the different pace of ageing of different individuals, and the longer average lifespan. Ageing can be analysed in chronological, social, biological, as well as psychological terms (Kliszcz, 2019). The phenomena of ageing and old age are the subject of numerous interdis-

ciplinary studies, which so far have not resulted in the development of a definition that would not raise any doubts. This is why the literature looks at these phenomena from different perspectives. In the sociological perspective particular importance is paid to the changes in the social roles, financial situation, and activity of elderly people. In the psychological perspective, the degradation in a person’s personality, more profound loneliness, and withdrawal from interpersonal contacts play an important role. In the medical perspective, irreversible and permanent biological changes in the human body are the most important (Pięstrzyński, Sarzała, 2020, p. 74).

<sup>1</sup> Article in polish language: [https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/58P\\_Szcz.pdf](https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/58P_Szcz.pdf)

A systematic increase in the proportion of elderly people in Poland's total population has been observed in recent years. At the end of 2021, the number of people aged 60 and more was 9.7 million, or 25.7% of Poland's total population. Statistic Poland's forecasts concerning people in this age group for 2030 indicate an increase in the size of this group to 10.8 million, and in 2050 its size may reach 13.7 million. According to Statistics Poland's forecasts, elderly people will constitute about 40% of Poland's total population (Statistics Poland, 2022a). Women are the majority of seniors' population. Most seniors live in cities. Only 28.8% of people aged 60 and more consider their physical fitness level as very high or high, and one in two seniors consider it average (Statistics Poland, 2022b). A decreasing number of seniors use libraries, attend cultural centres, clubs, and clubrooms. However, the biggest problem faced by elderly people each day is loneliness. One in five people aged 65 and more feels lonely, and this ratio is significantly higher among those over 80 (Little Brothers of the Poor Society, 2023).

The activity and mobilization of elderly people are therefore very important, as they make them interact with others, communicate with the world around them, and thus become members of specific social groups (Wawrzyniak, 2017). Loneliness, progressing disability, social isolation, and even premature death may be due to lack of activity (Kaczmarczyk, Trafiałek, 2017). The most important aspect of seniors' life is activity, which is directly correlated with their health, happiness, satisfaction, and quality of life. It determines seniors' sense of utility in the society (Młyński, 2018). In addition to the prophylactic, therapeutic, adaptive, integrating, shaping, informative, and psychosocial function, senior's activity is also aimed to 'support, for as long as possible, young and active old age and delaying, for as long as possible, dependent, passive, and senile old age' (Kawińska, 2018, p. 52).

One of people's basic activity at all development stages is proper communication. Proper communication with seniors contributes to, among other things, creating and maintaining social ties, expressing one's own desires, feelings, thoughts and experiences, belonging to a social group, a sense of being needed

and important, expanding and/or complementing the knowledge of elderly people, maintaining mental and physical fitness, respecting the rights and dignity of elderly people, etc. (Pitala, 2019). Communication with seniors may be hindered by the changes taking place in their cognitive processes, their behaviours and attitudes, as well as the failure of communication participants to take into account the difficulties associated with the ageing process (Pitala, 2019). Loneliness and alienation are caused by an unfriendly environment where contacts with others are only fragmentary and partial, and interpersonal relations are narrowed down to people's social roles. External and internal barriers appear nowadays that lead to difficulties in proper communication, including inclination to manipulate others, making decisions for others, imposing one's own opinion, paying attention to parts of statements and overlooking the rest, perception problems, a way of speaking that is incomprehensible to the interlocutor, lack of understanding and empathy, as well as generational communication barriers (Pitala, 2019, p. 162). The way elderly people communicate is affected by, among other things, biological factors, which include changes in their body and development process, also during the ageing phase. In the cognitive sphere, this includes the way they categorize the world, their value system, their life experiences, and the knowledge they have acquired. In the environmental dimension, communication can be affected by access to education, the place of residence, and the origin. The way seniors communicate can also be influenced by psychological factors as well as historical and socio-cultural conditions (Rosińska-Mamej, 2019). The existing barriers in the communication with elderly people discourage those around them from such communication, which, as has been mentioned, is the condition for their activity and mobilization. Active listening is essential in communicating with seniors. In view of the fact that a senior's answer can be slow and multi-threaded, often contains references to his or her own experiences and describes in detail things that are not very important, is slow in expressing the senior's thoughts and difficult in articulating his or her needs, the interlocutor must be very patient and understanding.

Due to the increasing involvement of organizations and institutions in the problem of ageing in the society, and considering the actions aimed at the stimulation of the activity of this social group, special attention must be paid to the communication with elderly people. Actions addressed to seniors must follow a thorough diagnosis, which requires active listening. Thanks to the right diagnosis, it is possible to help/support seniors in satisfying their needs. Also, the best ideas for activities for seniors cannot be implemented if the people conducting such activities are not prepared for proper communication with elderly people.

## **2. Senior policy – good practices**

Senior policy in Poland is based on ‘targeted long-term and systemic impacts of the state and other public and non-public entities on the shaping of the legal, economic, and social conditions with the aim of creating for elderly people an advantageous life situation that is adapted to the social and economic needs that change with age and to the health care and protection in all periods of life of elderly people’ (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2018). Currently the primary objective of senior policy is to improve the quality of life of elderly people by enabling them to stay independent for as long as possible (Słabiak, 2022). The senior policy’s objectives are achieved at the national as well as local and regional government level. Senior policy at the national level is implemented by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy. Programmes supporting seniors’ activity at this level include the Senior Wigor programme, later transformed into the multi-year Senior+ Programme for 2015-2020, the Government Programme for the Social Activity of Elderly People ASOS, and Opieka 75+. The first document dealing with issues associated with senior policy was the Objectives of the Long-Term Senior Policy in Poland for 2014-2020, on the basis of which another document, ‘Social Policy Towards Elderly People Until 2030. Safety – Participation – Solidarity’, was drafted. In 2023, senior policy became a task to be implemented by local and regional governments at

all levels (Act of 9 March 2023 amending the Act on commune-level local government the Act on district-level local government, and the Act on provincial-level regional government, 2023). This does not mean, however, that local and regional governments had not performed programmes addressed to seniors before that. The activities of this type include, for example, establishing universities of the third age, opening day care nursing homes, running animation programmes, and establishing senior councils.

A document that serves as a kind of road map for the achievement of social objectives in the Mazowieckie Province is the ‘Social Policy Strategy of the Mazowieckie Province for the Years 2021-2023’ adopted in 2022 by the Assembly of the Mazowieckie Province. The ‘Senior Policy Programme for the Mazowieckie Province for the Years 2022-2026’ develops and specifies in more detail the objectives and activities of that Strategy. One of the numerous open tenders organized by the Mazowieckie Province with the aim of implementing its senior policy is the tender for non-governmental organizations and the entities listed in Article 3 (3) of the Act on public-benefit activity and volunteering in the area of ‘Activity for the benefit of occupational and social integration and reintegration of people at risk of social exclusion’, and in particular in the tasks referred to as ‘Actions for the benefit of seniors in the area of increasing independence and countering the threat of social marginalization’. The organizer of the tender offers annual contracts under which the bidders will carry out actions including, in particular, organization of events and workshops for seniors, building and developing generational and inter-generational dialogue, ensuring access to new digital media, and attractive leisure activities.

As part of this tender, for the last five years, the ‘Feniks’ Foundation for Safety has regularly organized the public task entitled ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’. The principal criterion determining the possibility to take part in projects addressed to senior is a person’s age. In Poland, a senior is defined as a person of retirement age, i.e. Someone who has turned 60 (women) or 65 (men). Interestingly, in the public tasks implemented by the Mazowieckie Province for the residents of that province, the term

“elderly person” (senior) is understood as someone 55+ years old (by year). The objectives of the public task ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’ conform to the objectives of the strategic documents of the Mazowieckie Province: the Social Policy Strategy of the Mazowieckie Province for the Years 2021-2023 in the area of senior policy and the Provincial Senior Policy Programme for the years 2022-2026 for the Mazowieckie Province.

When planning activities under the ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’ public tasks, it was taken into consideration that elderly persons have right to access broadly-defined education and should feel obligated to work on their own development with the support of third parties. Since education can help seniors adapt to the economic, cultural, and social changes taking place in modern societies, it is important that the actions offered as part of the projects addressed to seniors are well-planned and, most importantly, fulfil the needs of the addressees.

Due to the great diversity of the senior population and the complexity of their needs dependent on the dynamics of their ageing, their biographies, and their individual personalities, it is necessary to diagnose the needs of seniors participating in each public task. The project ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’, which consisted of two thematic blocks, Safety and Passion, was a response to the analysis of the needs of the beneficiaries of a public task, conducted in 2019 by the ‘Feniks’ Foundation for Safety. In the successive years of the projects, the tasks conducted as its part changed as a result of the evaluation conducted. The tasks conducted each year in the ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’ project included workshops: ‘Don’t let them cheat, ridicule, or insult you’, ‘A safe senior in the world of new technologies’, ‘Exercise sets with fitness elements’, ‘Nordic walking’, and ‘Cooking is my passion’. To address the needs of the seniors participating in the project in the years 2019-2023, two other activities were performed: the ‘Senior on the road’ workshop, a training on first pre-medical aid, a training on countering domestic violence, a workshop titled ‘You can be a volunteer too’, a workshop ‘A senior’s sexual health’, a workshop ‘Surfing the net’, and a dog therapy workshop. Since 2023, in view

of seniors’ needs, a workshop has been conducted to improve the social skills and competences in the following areas:

- coping in difficult situations;
- coping with stress;
- increased self-esteem;
- increased awareness of own resources;
- motivation for being active, prevention of demotivating factors;
- assertiveness training;
- memory and attention focus training.

The offer of the organization carrying out the project was expanded in 2024 to include a visual art workshop, a music and singing workshop, and an ecology and gardening workshops.

As the originator and coordinator of the ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’ project, the author of this paper has seen the key importance of proper communication to the achievement of the project’s objectives. Communication helps build trust and a sense of self-esteem, helps reduce anxiety, fear, and loneliness, and gives a sense of belonging to a social group. Unfortunately, as Krzysztof and Agnieszka Ozga rightly notice, in literature on medicine, pedagogy, and social work, ‘discussion on real communication with elderly people is negligible’ (K. Ozga, A. Ozga, 2018, p. 277).

### **3. Methodology of the original research**

In 2022-2023, a study was conducted with the aim of discovering the needs of seniors, the aptness of the activation measures, and the unique characteristics of communication with the seniors participating in the project addressed to seniors entitled ‘Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth’. The results presented further in this paper concern a specific part of the study that focused on learning the unique characteristics of communication with elderly persons. The following research problem was formulated: What factors determine the proper communication with elderly persons? Data was

collected and analysed using a qualitative strategy based on the method of individual interview focused on the experiences of seniors participating in the 'Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth' project. The study used a partly categorized interview, which provided some flexibility by allowing asking additional questions. Due to the continuous contact with the seniors participating in the project, the author did not have any problems with recruiting the members of the study group. The trust earned in the course of implementation of the project resulted in extensive, concrete, and thoughtful statements. The time spent with the seniors helped build positive relations, which resulted in a friendly and comfortable atmosphere during the interviews. In order to complete the information obtained during the interviews, the following documents were analysed: report on the completion of the public task for the year 2022, report on the completion of the public task for the year 2023, evaluation of the public task 'Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth' for the year 2022, and evaluation of the public task 'Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth' for the year 2023.

The study involved a group of 86 seniors, individually designated in results section as (S), residing in rural areas of the Mazowieckie Province, specifically in the following communes: Bielsk, Radzanowo, Nowy Duninów and Bulkowo. The majority of the respondents were seniors aged 60-65 (39%) and 66-70 (22%). The study group also included seniors aged 71-80 (17%) and 55-59 (5%). Seniors aged 81 and more were the smallest group (3%) among the respondents. Women were the majority (81%) of the respondents. The respondents evaluated their health as good (72%) or very good (28%). Most of the respondents (79%) lived with their relatives and others (21%) lived by themselves.

#### **4. Results of the original research**

Presentation of the results can be divided into three areas associated with communication: listening, conversation, and understanding. These elements are an

important means to convey and disclose information, and constitute a method for collaboration in the process of activation of elderly people.

According to the seniors' accounts, there is a big problem with communication in the family environment in terms of listening. What is needed is not only listening to the seniors' needs, but also listening to them in matters of daily life. Even though they live with their relatives, they feel lonely. In their statements, they explain their family members and provide such excuses as lack of time, too much work, and problems at work or in personal life. The seniors are also aware that their relatives do not listen actively to what they have to say. One of the female respondents mentioned the following situation as an example: 'Sometimes I don't even feel like answering her questions, because I know that she is not listening to me. It happened many times that I talked to her and she talked on the phone at the same time or interrupted me to tell me about something else' (S3). On the other hand, seniors who lived by themselves said that they most often contacted their relatives by telephone. Their situation was a little different in terms of the ability to talk, but they were aware that the person they are on the phone with was not necessarily listening to them. If, in the caller's opinion, the conversation was too long, it was most often interrupted and ended with the promise of calling again. The situation was completely different when it came to listening to the seniors by the persons implementing actions as part of a project addressed to seniors. During the analysis of the needs, each senior can declare in which activities he or she wants to participate. The person conducting the analysis patiently listens to all suggestions, discusses them, provides additional information, and asks about interests or passions. Since there is no time limit, it is not necessary to interrupt the seniors' statements (Szczęsna, 2023b). The seniors noticed the flexibility of the instructors conducting the different workshops who, even at the expense of the time allocated for their workshops, listened to what the participants had to say: 'On the day we had the Nordic walking workshop, our friend Kaziu had an accident. We came to the workshop but we were all distracted and did not want to exercise. The instructor sat with us and

attentively listened to what happened, asked how we felt, and consoled us' (S17). Patience and empathy of the instructors is particularly important to seniors, especially if they suffer from speech disorders. One of the respondents admitted during the interview that after the stroke that he had suffered, he was embarrassed about his unclear, slow, and sometimes incomprehensible speech. However, when he noticed that the instructor patiently listened to what he had to say and asked if she understood him correctly, he began to participate in the activities actively. In their statements, the seniors stressed that during the activities they felt that the instructors not only heard them, but also listened to them.

A conversation is a tool used by elderly people mainly to express their own needs and opinions, and to present the state they are in. For the seniors participating in the study, of particular importance during a conversation was the patience and attention demonstrated by their interlocutor. What irritates seniors the most during a conversation is being interrupted or ignoring what they have to say: 'The worst thing is when someone interrupts me; they I often don't remember what I wanted to say and I start to get nervous' (S51). Several seniors admitted that they were aware of the fact that they most often talked about trivial things and their poor health. They know that hearing once again about their illnesses or life experiences may be tiresome to the people around them. However, they explain this by the intention to attract the interlocutor's attention. They have a very good opinion about the social skills and competences workshop conducted as part of the project. The exercises conducted during the workshop help them remember some words: 'During the memory and attention focus training, we solved a crosswords. I noticed then that I know many words, but I forgot them (...) I think that this happens because I don't use them on a daily basis' (S70). Moreover, the seniors are able to formulate long statements associated with their self-esteem. During a conversation, the instructor tries to find out the most about the senior's strengths and remind him or her in this way how unique and important he or she is (Szczęsna, 2022a). An important aspect for seniors is to adjust the message to be conveyed so

that they can understand it. Vocabulary that is too complicated and incomprehensible terminology discourage seniors from taking part in a conversation. Several respondents also pointed to the fact that the sheer possibility of having a conversation, without a specific topic, is very important to them: 'Form me personally, it does not matter what workshop is conducted on a given day; what is important is that someone comes to talk to us (...) Sometimes we need a conversation about everything and nothing, so that there is someone you can talk to' (S22). The importance of a conversation for seniors is demonstrated by the fact that the social skills and competences workshop is the most popular among them. During the activities, seniors often very eagerly talk about their feelings, thoughts, and emotions. At the end of the activities, they often emphasize that so far they have not talked about such things with anyone. The oldest respondents regret that their families talk to them like they talk to children. The language they use could be described as *baby talk*, and involves the use of simple sentences, brief messages, the plural form, and diminutives (Szostakowska, 2019, p. 9). They feel sorry that their families do not treat them 'seriously'.

During the interviews, many seniors noted the fact that they were aware of the ageing processes that have taken place in their life. These processes were a factor affecting how they communicated with the people around them. In conversations, they increasingly discussed issues that were irrelevant to the main topic of the conversations, added digressions, or made statements that were too detailed. Another problem in their communication was the inability to remember a common word, the slow pace of their speech, or their multi-thread statements. They also pointed at the fact that they felt 'overwhelmed' by the changing reality and did not understand the events and information around them, which made them experience a sense of chaos. They do not understand everything young people say, do not understand the terminology used in the media, and the lack of explanation and clarification causes in them a sense of loss and aggression. During the stress coping workshop, the respondents had the opportunity to identify different types of stressors in their daily life: not

being listened to, lack of understanding of what they have to say, ignoring their statements, as well treating them as if they were children. They increasingly feel a lack of attention on the part of those around them and dissatisfaction caused by a sense of their own imperfection, also in terms of communication.

The seniors are irritated by being perceived by the people around them in terms of their dependency and helplessness, when they consider themselves to be active and fully capable intellectually. They believe that the reason for this is the stereotypical perception of elderly people as infirm, requiring care, and a burden to their families. They are sorry to admit that they can be difficult partners in conversations. However, they believe that due to their life experiences, memories, and contribution to the current reality, they can be rightful partners for a dialogue. In their statements, they emphasize that they not only place demands on others, because they are aware that they also need to place demands on themselves. They think that their activity in the areas of listening, motion, and cognition slows down the ageing process and helps them communicate with others. Particularly valuable is their motivation to be active and stimulate their own development by making positive changes to their daily life, among other things. Participation in prophylactic and educational activities offered as part of a project addressed to seniors provides them with such an opportunity. All respondents positively evaluate the understanding of their needs and the communication during their participation in the activities conducted as part of the 'Passion – A Recipe for Everlasting Youth' project. What is especially important to them is a diagnosis of their needs so as to enable them to present their suggestions about the activities to be conducted. They mentioned participating in another project where they were not allowed to choose and were required to participate in activities that they did not find interesting: 'Nobody asked us if we wanted to participate in computer classes (...) It was very difficult and we did not understand anything. The instructor told us to press something and did not even come close to see if we did it correctly (...) After five minutes I did not know what to do and the instructor was not interested in coming close' (S84). The fact that they can present their suggestions each

year allows the seniors to participate in interesting activities that, in their opinion, have a very positive impact on their activation. This is confirmed by the increasing number of persons volunteering to participate in the project (Szczęsna, 2022b). The participants indicate the following positive characteristics of instructors: patients, respect for the interlocutor, empathy, flexibility in the choice of conversation topics, active listening, as well as focusing attention on their needs and expectations. During the interviews, all seniors emphasized the great importance of communication in their life and equated its lack to loneliness and isolation. Several seniors pointed to the fact that old age, as a natural phase in human life, is something that everyone will experience and, therefore, the society, especially young people, should expand their knowledge about communication with elderly persons.

The information provided in the analysed documents of the 'Feniks' Foundation for Safety indicates that prior to the project, each instructor participates in a 20-hours long training course entitled 'Interpersonal Communication with Seniors'. It is very important for organizers of projects addressed to seniors that each instructor must learn the phenomena and problems he or she may encounter when working with seniors in the area of communication, language, and speech. The purpose of this training course is to ensure professional communication with elderly persons. The Programme of the training course includes the basic tenets of the psycho-pedagogy of old age, the essence of communication, the principles, types and functions of communication, the communication barriers and interferences, active listening, the importance of an individual approach to each senior, as well as conflicts and methods of their resolution (Szczęsna, 2022a, 2023a).

## Summary and recommendations

Our current knowledge about the ageing process is very broad. In recent years, this development phase became the subject of interest of many researchers. This is not surprising because almost every report or publication starts with the words 'the society is becoming older

worldwide'. Researchers in various sciences analyse the society of older people in an interdisciplinary manner. It is therefore regrettable that interpersonal communication, which plays a key role in our daily life and is a foundation of social interactions, is practically disregarded in research on old age. The research results presented herein indicate the importance of communication in seniors' life. Communication is essential in activation and activity of elderly persons. Active ageing involves the adoption of '... a proactive attitude to the preservation of health, physical and mental activity, work and volunteering, and engaging in family and social life' (Kilian, 2020). Activation and activity of elderly people are facilitated by participation in projects addressed to seniors. However, the actions undertaken on such projects cannot be effective without paying special attention to interpersonal communication. The social aspect should be studied more closely in addition to strictly medical issues associated with seniors' communication.

The recommendations formulated on the basis of the study discussed herein are as follows:

1. In order to build an effective interpersonal communication with seniors, it is necessary to increase the awareness of the understanding of individual experiences, specific needs, expectations and fears of seniors.
2. In order to build mutual trust and an open dialogue, the instructor conducting various activities must pay special attention to empathy, patience, engagement, and understanding when communicating with seniors. An emphatic approach allows entering the world of experiences and emotions of the elderly person, and patience allows building an atmosphere of mutual trust and strengthening the interpersonal relations. These very important social skills help seniors express their feelings and thoughts, and process the information they receive.
3. In order to give seniors a sense of appreciation and being listened to, which helps them openly express their desires and needs, the persons working with elderly persons should be taught active listening. This skill will help them recognize not only those needs that are stated explicitly, but also those hidden 'between the lines'.
4. The awareness of the persons working on projects addressed to seniors about the unique characteristics of interpersonal communication with seniors can be raised by organizing training on this topic. In view of the fact that communication is immensely important in the process of activity and activation of seniors, this demand should be regulated in legislation, and an obligation to attend such training should be introduced.
5. The awareness of the public about the importance of elderly people in the society and communication with them should be raised. Like any other social group, seniors should be able to be effective and full members of the society, to live safe and dignified life, free from isolation and discrimination. Only through proper communication can we fulfil all these demands.



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