

It's All Academic Podcast #7 part 2:

How to age well with Dr Jitka Vseteckova

Ben Wood and Dr Jitka Vseteckova:

BEN WOOD: Welcome to It's All Academic, the OpenLearn podcast from the Open University. This is part two of our discussion on aging well. We're talking to Jitka Vseteckova, and we're delving into what we can do to help ourselves age better.

We have covered the topics of nutrition, hydration, and physical activity. There's still plenty more to discover, so let's pick up the conversation, exactly where we left off, and let's get back to it and discover more from Jitka.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JITKA VSETECKOVA: Thank you, Ben. So the cognitive stimulation is essentially about thinking, learning, and how we use our brain, how we can optimize the function of our brain, as we grow older, and use it to its maximum potential despite all the age-related changes that happen.

As we know, the metabolism slows down. There's muscle atrophy happening, as we grow older. Our bones are thinning. The blood circulation is not always that regular. Sometimes, the nutrition is not optimal. Hydration is not optimal.

And all this affects the way the brain works. Nevertheless, with aging, the brain functions might start. We all are aware that there are changes in memory as we grow older.

And the main question is, what it is we can do to actually boost the brain functions, optimize the brain functions, as much as can be for each of us, as individual, as we grow older.

The brain, really, like muscles, works better, the more it gets stimulated. So that's why the cognitive stimulation refers to us using our brain to learn to engage with things, people, events, read.

That can be anything, memorize things, play games, do puzzles, Sudoku, do anything that kind of makes our brain work a little bit more and a little bit extra. We, sometimes, say it's great to start with something you've been doing for a long time, and you enjoy doing it, so keep doing that every day, just make sure it's every day.

And sometimes, we also talk about the mental sweat, which is where we say do something you haven't done before. Learn a new dance. Start learning a new language. Learning dancing languages, playing a musical instrument are fundamental ways to stimulate and boost our cognitive functions, our brain functions.

Nevertheless, they may not be available to everybody. So think about what you like to do. Take a project. It's just up to us, what we want to what we want to engage with.

But sometimes, alongside things that we've been doing for a long time and we keep doing, which is great already, it's good to step it up and pose a challenge to our brain, no matter how aging it is. It can be fun. And sometimes, we say, do it with family.

The Take 5 to Age Well public talk series, through those educational interventions, we produced a huge amount of materials short films, short podcasts, short articles on OpenLearn.

We have the Aging Well collection that people can engage with, but also, through the Take 5, we have co-designed and co-produced a toolkit that started Live Well together.

This toolkit was externally funded by Hamad Foundation, and we worked with Campaign for Learning in the co-design and co-production of it, as well as many other organizations in their advisory capacity across the Four Nations.

And we have created a toolkit that is suitable for families to engage in health and well being oriented, mental and physical health and well being oriented, intergenerational activities.

So there are plenty of resources that are available that can make it fun. But the main thing is that we don't start thinking, I'm too old. I don't need to do any of that. The thing is that the older, it's like with the muscles.

The older we get, the more we need to keep an eye on staying tuned and stimulating our muscles, as well as our brain. And the cognitive stimulation, often, doesn't need to necessarily, but can go nicely hand in hand with social stimulation, which is about how we engage and connect with others.

Again, it's an incredibly important pillar. And I think before pandemic, we would be already hearing about nutrition and movement, mainly. We have done a lot of work with the aging, where public talks team, as well as the Take 5 team and co-producing resources and really pushing the messaging around hydration.

We've done some BBC show. I've advised on BBC TV morning show. I've advised on production of several either documentaries or short films around hydration, recorded many. And it is something that's really high on our agendas.

And I think during the pandemic and coming out of the pandemic, the world started turning their attention to the cognitive stimulation and to the engagement and social stimulation being hugely important on the health and well-being agenda, especially for people who are aging.

Because the loneliness and isolation, really, can kill. And it is great that there is lots of space in the overall health and well-being messaging given to the cognitive and social stimulation as well. So they work beautifully, hand in hand.

And it really depends on what people want to do. Some people engage better, face to face. Some people may not be so keen every day to have face to face interactions, but engaging with others in any other way, online, over the phone, text messages is just great because we never know what response is coming.

And then we need to produce a response of our own. And when I was doing one of my first podcasts for a BBC program, I was asked, so you say we need to go out and speak to our neighbors? And I said, that's brilliant. Go out and speak to anyone.

Smile at people and say-- even if you do short conversations, it's already an engagement that counts for a lot. That makes us feel less isolated. We're not on our own. We are not on our own in this world. But for some of us, it's much harder to reach out than for others.

And then I got the question, OK, so if I go and speak to my neighbor, but my neighbor irritates me. I don't like doing that. It makes me angry, and I just don't like them. I would say, well, but it still counts as a stimulation.

So engaging with people, we don't always get those happy interactions, but any interaction is really good, going out. And even if it's just say hi, nice day, lovely day for a walk, or horrible weather, I can't wait to be home back, even though small exchanges that we exchange in passing are really important.

A, we get outdoors, which is really important. We do a little bit of movement, which is fantastic. Being outdoors is incredibly important for us, because we learn-- our brain gets cognitively stimulated a lot. We look at things.

We change scenery. We hear things different. We hear different things than when we are in our house. We hear birds. We can start thinking, oh, it's odd. Everything is snowed under, it's freezing. And yet, there are still birds. Why are they birds? Shouldn't they be sleeping or something?

So we do engage differently. We learn. It makes us think. It makes us go out. It makes us move, and it can help us to get some of the human-to-human interactions and exchanges that are really important for us. The world is filled with humans, and human interactions are incredibly important for us.

BEN WOOD: I think it's really reassuring, actually, to hear you say that, actually, social stimulation doesn't have to mean face to face. It doesn't have to be you've got to get outside the factory.

You could do it online, perhaps, if there's forums, if you're a fan of a particular author or a musician, and there's groups online that you can chat with through social media platforms. That can be a good thing. That was really nice to hear.

And I think one of the things you just said there as well, the day-to-day interactions. Things like the self-scan tills at the supermarket, so even making that change, whereas, you might normally go and scan your own bits and pieces, your own bag of shopping, and walk out the supermarket, having spoken to nobody, a simple change, like, actually, give yourself an extra five minutes.

Go and stand in the queue and actually have a brief conversation with the person that's scanning your shopping for you. It's something as simple as that could be a positive change to make.

JITKA VSETECKOVA: Yeah, I totally agree. I don't go to the scanners, unless I really have to, and there is no other way. I like the interaction. And even saying hello, good morning, or good day, thank you, and having this little interaction with the person who helps you with the tale is just amazing.

And sometimes, you also make their day. So you never know when you smile, even if it's a shy smile, even if it's a half a smile, even if it's just an eye contact, recognizing somebody else's presence in this world will actually make their day.

And it's such a little thing for us to do, but it makes people around us happier as well. And it makes us happier, too, I think. So for the cognitive and social stimulation, it's really engaging with anything and everything that's happening around us.

And it can be listening to the news on the radio, watching the TV, just thinking and engaging with what is coming our way and maybe helping it out a little bit by going outdoors is really great and also the physical activity.

So when we talk about the brain boosters, what really helps our brain staying well and functioning optimally, we've mentioned the nutrition. We've mentioned the hydration. We've mentioned the cognitive stimulation, the social stimulation.

But one of the hugely powerful ones is the physical activity as well. There is a demonstrable effect that research has proven, that physical activity movement has on our brain functions. The more we move, the more the brain gets stimulated as well.

So let's not forget that one. And even if it is-- if we have the opportunity, and it's a possibility for us to go out and spend 10 minutes, two or three times a day outdoors, it is a great thing for us in the longer term, if we can do this, try to do this every day.

And I totally acknowledge that there is not one day that's exactly as the other day. We think, today, I'm going to do this tomorrow again, and we're going to do twice as much because I loved it today. Tomorrow is another day.

Nevertheless, still on that day, let's go out. If we feel great, fine. Let's do more. It's great. If we don't feel so great, let's just get out. And instead of 20 minutes walk, let's do five or 10 minutes. But let's get out first.

Chances are that the moment we get out, because there's the hardest thing to do, getting over your house threshold, the moment we get out and stay five minutes out there, we might easily be actually staying another 10.

Well, that takes us close to 20. That's brilliant. If we can do it twice a day, three times a day, fantastic. But it is important we do try. And if it's not the usual time we spend, let's do a little bit of less, but let's still go.

Also, the fresh air and the changing seasons and that the climate really helps us with our immune system. So it boosts our immune system, having everyday fresh air and being spending a little bit of time outside every day is really good for our immune system and also for our vitamin D.

And we all know that there is a message that we need to take vitamin D supplements. The older we get, especially in winter months, et cetera. The thing with vitamin D is such that the vitamin D is best stimulated through the receptors we have in our skin, but because we age, we have fewer and fewer receptors the older we get.

So that makes it a little bit tricky. So sometimes, it's worth speaking to our GPs and getting the right vitamin D supplements. The vitamin D, that's really beneficial for us, for our bones and everything needs to be binded by calcium.

And it takes a form of vitamin D, which is usually the D3. That is the one we need to get. Taking vitamin D supplements, without actually going out, having any of those rays on our skin doesn't always do the magic trick.

So if in doubt, check with your GP, what is the vitamin D that everybody that you should be taking individually. But if we get out, even in the winter months, and we stay 10 minutes in the morning, 10 minutes in the afternoon, outside, with a little bit of skin bare, even through clouds, we will still get some of those receptors stimulated.

So it's always great to keep the body producing its own remedies, and staying outdoors really helps with that as well. So it's a win-win-win-win-win.

BEN WOOD: Yeah, I mean, I think from what you said, as well as you've been going through each of these, you're thinking, OK, everyone isn't necessarily able to do all of them, or you're not going to need to take on all of these changes.

If changes need to be made, not necessarily to do them all in one go, but it does feel like they all lead on to one to another. I say maybe you address your hydration or nutrition firstly and actually feel a little bit more energized.

And doing that small change gives you that little bit more energy, which is going to make you think, actually, I could go out, or I could walk to the shop today. And making that change leads to the social change that when you're there, actually, you should feel a little better about yourself.

You're a little happier. You might have that conversation. You might give that smile to someone that you pass. And there are things that there's just that one small change can lead to another change, which can lead to another.

So it's not something that people need to listen to this and go, oh my God, I need to change my nutrition and my hydration. I need to be more social. I need to be physical.

Actually, maybe take one of those elements and make that change and let the others follow. Is that something that you've seen? Does that follow in your research that, actually, one small change really can snowball.

JITKA VSETECKOVA: Yeah, absolutely, Ben. You're absolutely right. And the thing is that when we also hydrate better, it makes our brain work more optimally. So if we, for example, take medication on a regular basis, sometimes, if we get dehydrated, and it's chronic, and it's ongoing, our body slowing down metabolism already due to aging, slows furthermore by dehydration.

So it just adds to the already existing age-related changes that are happening in the background. So sometimes, the side effect medications make us feel confused or more sedated or more tired, and different days are different, et cetera.

But once this has lifted because we hydrate better, this is what can also prompt better engagement with the environment. And it's meeting people saying hi, but it can also be engaging more with what is actually going on, on radio and TV.

Let's face it, the news today are not really very positive on any sides. Nevertheless, conversations that people are having around us-- and we would normally shut ourselves from because we just don't feel at the level of engaging, we might actually feel better if we hydrate better.

So you're absolutely right that one change can lead to another. And it is one of the things that we really try to message through the Take 5 is that it's great to start and start wherever you are. So we help people take an action, start wherever they are, and help them a step further to where they would like to be.

And it is a process. It's not something that happens in one day, overnight. It's something that ideally we start, and we may keep happening, and then one change can lead to another. The five pillars the reason why I think the Take 5 to Age Well has proven such an effective and great initiative.

So it is an educational intervention in its core, but it has taken shape of a public national public health campaign. One of the reasons why it's flying with the participants and with people who sign up, so over through the pilot run in 2023 and run in 2025, we signed up for over 5,000 people online.

And then there is also, of course, people who signed up offline because we have a digital, as well as non-digital provision, because we're aware of the gap that the digital literacy is posing. And we're trying to create a provision, co-design and co-produce provision for everyone.

But people engaged with it-- and I think the campaign was quite a success, because it offers new beginnings. It says instead of saying, don't do this bad, bad behavior for one month, we say, you can start something new exciting with us now.

So it is about making a start somewhere, and then everything snowballs. Another reason why I think the Take 5 to Age Well has been a great success is because we offer choice. We don't limit the actions or the one action in one area.

We say, our thinking behind this is that, perhaps, you are already thinking about nutrition or doing something around your nutrition, and looking at what you eat, how you eat it, et cetera. Maybe you can think of hydration as well, and doing a little bit extra every day in that department, so people can choose.

And if you offer nutrition, hydration, physical, social, cognitive stimulation, these are things we naturally can do every day. So it facilitates people's involvement, and then their ownership and commitment and motivation to actually stick with the action that we offer for one month.

And another thing, another reason why I think the campaign was really a good success is the materials we co-produced and co-designed with specialists that are evidence-based, but they are public facing, and people receive them as regular newsletters during when they sign up for the campaign, these were a huge success.

I think this is what really gives us one of our unique selling points, apart from what I've already mentioned, is how well-tailored these are to the five pillars. So the messaging is short.

And through the Aging Well public talk series and other research work me and the team have done in the past, we've realized that if we can offer people information, it needs to be public facing, and it needs to be bit-sized. It needs to be short.

Nobody wants to listen to someone-- the fact that we're doing the podcast is actually a wonder to me, because-- nevertheless, for anyone who might want to listen and find this interesting and just doesn't want to run away with all this information circling around, the engagement materials were really very successful.

We had incredible engagement metrics on those people, more than 50% of people opened all of those newsletters and read through and clicked on links throughout. This is usually not the case for online campaigns.

People do engage to some extent, but not to this extent. We had, on some days, people engaged around 70%, 67%. On other days, it was around 47%, so I think this was our lowest point. But in general, it was somewhere around 55%, 60%, where people actually engaged with the materials, which was really incredible.

Usually, online campaigns engage around 30% of people in the materials. So it really shows that we're probably stepping into the right stream and going into the right direction.

BEN WOOD: The people that are interested in that campaign. Is it coming back? Will there be another Take 5 to Age Well campaign coming up this year, next year? What can people-- what should they be looking out for and when?

JITKA VSETECKOVA: Yeah, thank you, Ben. I get goosebumps when somebody asks that question. There is a reason why academics do not often run a national public health campaigns. The team is absolutely amazing, and we've done incredible work.

I hope we will rerun. It is difficult to say when exactly at this moment in time. We will not run in 2026 because we don't have the sufficient funds to source the team that is behind this to actually run the campaign again.

We're looking into options for 2027. We would love to do that, but the funding is needed because we keep running-- we have run the campaign in 2023 and 2025 on a shoestring budget. We were super happy or super motivated to do that.

Nevertheless, if we are sustainably to run it again and again, we need to look into resourcing it properly. And it has just one thing that is on my hands to keep looking for funding. So that's one thing.

Nevertheless, we are now in a phase, where we are getting increasingly more and more requests to adapt the Take 5 to Age Well campaign to different audiences. So we've been working very closely with Age Scotland, who has been, since the very early days, our very important partner in co-creating the non-digital Take 5.

So to Age Scotland is now running and fully adopting the Take 5 to Age Well, non-digital arm of the campaign. They are doing incredible work with it, and it's really phenomenal to see how the team is making it work across Scotland.

So that's wonderful. Our partner, Age UK, we run the campaign in 2025 jointly. It was fantastic working so closely with Age UK, and we have fantastic working relationship. We do hope and

we work on some other projects jointly and with many other partners, of course. The team is very large.

But we're, for example, now very closely working with Hillingdon and Hillingdon Council and the GP Federation in Hillingdon and Age UK in Hillingdon and Brent, and other organizations that are looking at preventing people preventing frailty and/or decreasing frailty scores or changing frailty scores.

So we're now in the process of adapting Take 5 to run it specifically for this population in Hillingdon. We've received some funding for that. We are also working with the NHS in Northamptonshire.

We've received funding through the NHS Northamptonshire charity trust to do work on adapting the Take 5 to people who have been recently diagnosed with a low-grade hematological cancer to support their patient's journey.

So that's another adaptation or work we're doing. So we are doing discrete pieces of work, looking at more specific populations. Because one thing is that the Take 5 is a powerful connector and catalyst.

This is what we've learned through all the years of working on the campaign and with the campaign. We also want to step up the work with a diverse communities, so engaging more diverse communities, getting funding.

So we're now in the process of trying to get funding to really have more resource and manpower to actually go and work closer with diverse communities across the UK to support them adopting the Take 5, but also gathering feedback and having that them present in the drawing board and co-designing the Take 5 shape that would actually work for them.

So that's the work we're looking into doing as well. And the Take 5 being an amazing connector, because it's not there to exchange, existing working evidence-based interventions. It's there to connect them well.

And also through the materials, the newsletters, signpost effectively, what is happening locally to people that they might actually find useful and interesting to join. And it is a powerful catalyst. Because it enables people to actually start expressing their views about health and well being and raising their own awareness about what they're doing, what they could be also doing, which is, frankly, the best start for all of us to age well.

BEN WOOD: So, I mean, there may not be a campaign currently sharing that people can directly get involved in, but as you've just heard over the last hour or so, there is so much that people can actually do.

There's so much that you can take away and start making these changes. And as I said, we've talked to you for a good hour there. We've got some fantastic stuff. I'm going to try and put you on the spot here.

The last thing I'm going to ask you is, if there is one bit of advice that people should take from this and is the one thing that you would say, this is the thing I want you to remember from everything we've said over the last hour, what's that one thing you would give people and say, remember this.

JITKA VSETECKOVA: I would say, every day is a new day. If you didn't do something yesterday, don't worry. Try to do it today. We're not machines. We cannot do everything to 100%. We don't feel like that every day.

But let's say if we are 60%, 70%, maybe 80% going in the right direction, if we missed yesterday, honestly, nothing happened. So if you do a little bit, try to do it every day. If you didn't do it every day, don't beat yourselves for it.

This is not a tool that should help you with self-flagellation. It's a tool that should help you start, wherever you are and help you step further to where you would like to be.

BEN WOOD: Perfect. I think that is the ideal note to end this conversation on. So yeah, thank you so much. This has been some fascinating takeaways from that. And I think I just want to say to everyone who's been listening, we'd love to know what your takeaways are from it.

Obviously, we asked Jitka the one thing she wanted to leave you with, but let us know-- we'd love to hear in the comments if there's anything that you've heard today that's made you think, yeah, that's something I can do.

That's what I'm going to do, taking it forward. If you've been involved in the Take 5 to Age Well campaign, if you were one of those people who actually took part, then let us know again, how has it changed you. What did you take away from that?

Do you feel better? I really hope, and I'm sure that you do. So, yeah, let us know. And we asked at the very start of this, are you aging well? And I don't know whether you're going to come away from this thinking that you are, that you're not, maybe that you can definitely age better.

So like I say, let us know. Leave something in the comments for us to know what you think. If you've got any questions, I'm sure we can put some of those to you and get some replies to you as well.

All the links to the resources that I mentioned will be available in the notes for this. And yeah, as I say, we shall sign off and say, Jitka, thank you so much for your time. It's been absolutely fascinating, and yeah, some really interesting stuff. So, thank you so much for joining us.

JITKA VSETECKOVA: Thank you, Ben, and thank you all for listening. And I'm looking forward to your comments.

BEN WOOD: And yeah, we hope you join us again on It's All Academic for the next episode very shortly. Thank you very much for joining us, and we will see you again soon. Cheers. Bye bye.