

Utilizing an Empathic Sensory Experience to Understand Age-Related Sensory and Functional Decline

The Situation

Negative attitudes toward the process of aging and older adults affect how people treat others and how they think about their own aging process. Education and educational experiences can be used as a strategy to challenge common misconceptions about aging, encourage empathy, increase knowledge, give participants realistic expectations, and encourage health-promoting behaviors. While developing knowledge allows for transformative shifts in attitudes, it seems to be only one aspect. Scholars have argued that to truly change perspective, learners must engage in an experiential activity, possibly through simulations of the experience accompanied by discussion. While this is a popular active learning technique, most interventions focused on changing attitudes about aging are done with college-aged participants. Furthermore, many community-based entities are unable to adopt or adapt curricula because of replicability and adaptability concerns, logistics or other disconnects.

What We Did

Gray for a Day was developed by K-State Research and Extension as an evidence-informed curriculum that aims to educate participants on the age-related sensory and functional challenges that some adults might face through engaging content education, simulations that reflect daily routines, simple tasks, and leisure or social activities and discussion to facilitate reflection of the experience. *Gray for a Day* has been implemented across the state of Kansas, and has been adopted for use in 13 other states. This program has been utilized with middle school, high school, and college students, 4-H members, staff of long-term care facilities, CNA and LPN students, and even older adults themselves. In total, we have reached thousands of individuals representing a variety of locations, ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, employment status and profession, and both genders. Throughout Extension system's grassroots presence and representation at the county level, we were able to engage Kansans in interactive, purposeful learning that works to reduce ageism, promote age-positive attitudes and behaviors, and improve one's overall health and wellness in an effort to promote optimal aging.

Outcomes

Gray for a Day participants consistently report an increase in awareness of age-related sensory and functional decline and its impact on one's daily life. The program consistently encourage its participants to thinking about how they can better interact with and support older adults in their communities, as well as understand the connection between overall health and one's future sensory and functional well-being. knowledge about aging, a desire to be more considerate and understanding of older adults, and the need to take better care of themselves in order to improve their ability to age well. Finally, 88% of participants made a plan to improve their overall lifestyle in order to improve their sensory and functional well-being in the future.

Success Story

As a direct result of this program's success and impact in Kansas, numerous other state Extension systems, K-12 teachers, and college professors have requested access to this curriculum nationwide. The reach of K-State Research and Extension has truly surpassed the borders of Kansas with this curriculum, and its programmatic benefits are being experienced across the country having reached nearly 10,000 individuals since the program's inception in 2016. K-State Research and Extension is proud to play a role in increasing knowledge and awareness of sensory and functional aging, encouraging individuals to better interact with and support older adults, and motivating participants to make changes now to prevent further age-related declines in the future.

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