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# Older Adults' Experiences of How Participating in a Senior Summer Camp Has Affected Their Lives – A Phenomenographic Study

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## ABSTRACT

Several municipalities in Sweden organize senior summer camps where older adults can meet and where loneliness and social isolation can be mitigated. Few studies, however, examine how the older adults themselves describe the experience in retrospect and how it might have influenced their daily lives after the stay. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how older adults who participated in a senior summer camp experience the impact the stay has had on their lives. The study has a descriptive qualitative design that uses a phenomenographic approach to explore the variations in the older adults' conceptions of how their participation at the senior summer camp may have affected them. Nineteen older adults aged between 66 and 94 years were interviewed. Three descriptive categories emerge: "Mitigating loneliness," "Developing as a person" and "Gaining inspiration." The study shows that the older adults experience that the stay at the summer camp has had lasting effects on their quality of life. The sense of community at the camp helped them break the experience of loneliness, they improved their self-confidence and gained a positive attitude to life, that it is worth living and that there is much left to experience, regardless of their age.

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## Background

Aging is a transitional period wherein people experience changes, not only in physical health but also in social roles and well-being (Gilmour, 2012). Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's population over 60 years is expected to nearly double from 12% to 22% (WHO, 2015). In recent decades, it has been highlighted that participating in meaningful activities is important for older adults' well-being. Engagement in social and voluntary activities appears to be particularly beneficial to older adults, as it has been found to be associated with positive outcomes for physical

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health and mental well-being (Van Hees et al., 2020). Older adults who have a diverse network and who participate in social activities are associated with better health than those with a restricted network (Atad & Caspi, 2020). However, having many social contacts is no guarantee for not feeling lonely, as one can feel lonely among others. As concluded by Larsson et al. (2019), the older adults in their study experienced being very lonely, even if they had rich social lives. The experience of loneliness was connected to not having anyone to turn to in confidence and share experiences with. The quality of social contacts is hence also important for reducing the feeling of loneliness.

There are different kinds of loneliness. A well-established distinction can be found in the work of Weiss (1973), who differentiates between social loneliness and emotional loneliness. Social loneliness is the lack of ties to friends and acquaintances with whom you feel connected or can entrust yourself in. Emotional loneliness refers to the lack of someone to turn to in confidence and to trust in depth (Weiss, 1973). From the perspective of nursing science and end-of-life care, there is also reason to acknowledge existential loneliness. Existential loneliness is the feeling of being disconnected from life and even from the universe. It implies a feeling of being fundamentally separated from others and that no one really listens or understands (cf. Bolmsjö et al., 2019). For some older adults this can be linked to a feeling of meaningless waiting, a longing for a deeper contact, because they may experience limited freedom due to physical difficulties (Bolmsjö et al., 2019). Robertson (2019) shows the importance of developing and testing psychosocial methods in research to deal with loneliness. Older people generally want to spend time with people who are emotionally meaningful to them, rather than with larger numbers of acquaintances with whom they are less emotionally connected. Thus, as Robertson (2019) and Larsson et al. (2019) argue, it is important to offer activities that allow for a deeper friendship to develop rather than just focusing on increasing the number of social contacts.

Sjöberg et al. (2019) have studied older adults' experiences of quality of life and whether existential loneliness can be alleviated. Their results show that meaningful fellowship with relatives and friends can ease existential loneliness. The feeling of intimacy and being able to express love, that people around them see them as important, and being the focus of other people's care are important parts of the older adult's everyday life. Being able to accept the current situation and feeling satisfied with one's life history are also important for experiencing a good quality of life. Many older adults experience loneliness and losses in life, which can lead to depression (Burholt & Scharf, 2014; Öhman & Abrahamsson, 2017). Halvorsrud and Kalfoss (2016) have found that older adults emphasize that it is important to experience intimacy and to have the opportunity to express and receive love, which can reduce depression and increase the quality of life for older adults. James et al. (2014) concluded in

their study that important aspects of experiencing a good quality of life when you grow older are that you feel that you have power over your life and a meaningful everyday life.

In Sweden some municipalities have started offering summer camps for older adults, but with some variation in how they are arranged (Nilsson et al., 2018). A few studies about summer camps for older people have been conducted. Nilsson et al. (2018) focus on the leaders of a summer camp and Larsson et al. (2019) examine why older adults were feeling lonely and considered themselves to be in need of attending a senior summer camp, and how they experienced loneliness before they went to the summer camp.

Studies that evaluate how older adults experience visiting a summer camp are rare (Nilsson et al., 2018). To our knowledge, there is only one study (Wallroth et al., 2021) that focuses on how participants at a senior summer camp themselves describe their experiences. One conclusion from that study is that for the participants, meeting others in the same situation led to the important realization that they were not alone in feeling lonely. To our knowledge, there are currently no studies focusing on how the stay at the senior summer camp has affected the participants' everyday lives after the stay (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Therefore, this study focuses on older adults' experiences within six months after attending a senior summer camp. The present study is part of a larger study evaluating a project that arranged a senior summer camp for older adults in the summer of 2017.

## **Aim**

The aim of the study is to describe, from their own perspective, how older adults who participated in a senior summer camp experience the influence the stay has had on their lives after the stay.

## **Research design and method**

Phenomenology was developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 1900s (2004 [1913]); it was originally an epistemological perspective that he called transcendental phenomenology. In the 1970s Phenomenography was developed by Ference Marton and associates in Göteborg, Sweden. Larsson and Holmström (2007) gives a good explanation on what phenomenographic is and how it differs from phenomenology. Phenomenology aims to clarify the structure and meaning of a phenomenon (Giorgi, 1999). Phenomenography denotes a research approach aiming at describing the different ways a group of people understand a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). In other words, phenomenology focuses on similarities while phenomenography focuses on differences. Thus, this study has a descriptive

qualitative design and uses a phenomenographic approach to explore the variations in the older adults' conceptions of how the participation at a senior summer camp may have had an impact on their everyday lives after the stay. Individual interviews – a method which is central to phenomenography – are used to gain insight into the conceptions (Marton, 1981, 1996). The result is, however, a description on the collective level with distinct descriptive categories describing variations of the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). Phenomenography makes a distinction between descriptions of the phenomenon in the first order perspective of “*what* something is” and the second order perspective of ‘*how* something is,’ which refers to people’s experiences of a phenomenon. The second order perspective is essential in phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997).

Within phenomenology a concept that has been understood and interpreted in numerous ways is the concept of bracketing (Larsson & Holmström, 2007). Husserl (2004[1913]) himself proposed several different levels of intensity in phenomenological reduction. Giorgi (1997) writes that most levels have a more philosophical significance and comes from the first phenomenological reduction which is to move away from the natural attitude i.e., to move away from how one usually relates to the world and in everyday life to achieve a pure ego and to see the world in a different way, free from preconceived notions. Giorgi (1999) also asserts that undertaking the first level of phenomenological reduction is the very minimum that a researcher must do to describe the research as phenomenological. However, in phenomenographic the research should focus on understanding the lifeworld of the research participants in the study in question. Thus, focus is on the phenomenon under study; descriptions of peoples’ lived experience of the phenomenon are used to avoid the risk of the researcher’s subjective bias (van Manen, 1997).

## Setting and context

This study focuses on a senior summer camp that was organized, by a municipality in Sweden in the summer of 2017. The summer camp offered two periods of stay and each period lasted one week. Two municipality employed senior guides<sup>1</sup> were present the whole period. There were also volunteers at the senior summer camp - two that were there for the first half, and two that were there for the second half. The summer camp was located in an old health resort and included accommodation, breakfast buffet, morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea buffet and dinner as well as a round trip

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<sup>1</sup>Senior guides [in Swedish: Seniorlots] is a function that exists in many Swedish municipalities with the task of being a support for the elderly to find their way in society, both within the municipality's activities and among other actors. Sometimes (as was in the case of this study) the senior guides are responsible for arranging activities for the elderly. Social workers, occupational therapists or physiotherapists are often recruited for this professional role.

bus for the participants. The cost of the stay for the municipality was 1,475 SEK (144 in USD) per participant and per day. The participant however only paid a fee of totally 1,200 SEK (117 in USD) for the stay.

The summer camp had the theme of “Health and quality of life.” Several lectures were arranged on the theme, and the program contained various activities such as for example board games, singing and music, walks, music quizzes, painting, swimming in a lake, taking a bath in a wood-fired hot tub, and morning gymnastics. It was voluntary to participate in the activities and the activities were carried out in groups. Great emphasis was placed on experiencing the sense of community, meeting other people with similar experiences.

Information about the summer camp was published on the municipality’s website, on the local radio and in the newspaper. In addition, a brochure was printed and distributed to health clinics. Those who were interested in participating in the summer camp registered on the municipality’s website or by phone. As the number of places at the senior summer camp was limited, only 40 out of the 74 older adults who applied were selected to go. Telephone interviews were conducted with all 74 applicants. The purpose was to get an idea of how those who applied for the summer stay experienced loneliness and whether they were bothered by it. Based on the results, the applicants were grouped into three groups, those who often experience loneliness, those who experience loneliness sometimes and those who did not experience loneliness. Those who were deemed to be in greatest need were granted a spot. In an earlier part of this project, the participants’ experience of loneliness before going on the senior summer camp was examined. They mentioned, for example, that they experienced that it was hard to contact others, that their old friends had passed away or that they had lost touch. Being a caregiver and having relocated from another town were also mentioned by the participants as reasons for being lonely. Other aspects that were brought up had to do with not being quite as flexible as they would like to in keeping in touch with old friends and making new ones. This inflexibility could be caused by poor health, poor finances or not being able to drive a car or go by bus and train. A lack of social activities arranged for seniors was also mentioned (see Larsson et al., 2019).

The purpose of the summer stay was to reduce the loneliness of older adults so that they would meet new acquaintances, make new social contacts, and participate in joint activities. Participants had to be positive about meeting other people. Taken together, this could in the long run lead to an expansion of their social network.

## **Participants**

The selection criteria for this study were that participants had to be older adults who had participated in a summer camp arranged in 2017, differing in gender, age, living arrangements, and the way that they were experiencing

loneliness. Out of the forty older adults who went to summer camp, twenty were asked to participate in this study. An information letter was sent to all the twenty potential participants, asking them to participate in the study and describing the study's purpose, how data was going to be handled, confidentiality and that participation was voluntary. A consent form was also sent out together with the information letter. After a few days, the potential participants were contacted by the researcher to asking if they were interested in participating in the study and if so, determine the time and place for the interview. One of the twenty potential participant declined. Thus, the sample consists of 19 older adults, 4 men and 15 women between the ages of 66 and 94. Most of the participants was living alone ( $n = 15$ ), while 2 were living with their partners and 2 were a couple living together. The study was approved by the regional research ethics committee (diary number: 17RS4499).

### Data collection

The interview guide was constructed by the authors. The questions aimed to determine the participants' conceptions of whether the stay at the senior summer camp had influenced their lives afterward. The main questions were:

- How do you perceive the time after the senior summer camp?
- Would you say that the summer stay has changed your everyday life in any way?
- If so, in what way?

Follow-up questions were asked depending on how fully the person answered the main questions. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors, an experienced social worker and sociologist. Her competence may have contributed to the participants feeling a sense of confidence. Important to note is that the interviewer was not engage in the senior summer camp.

The summer camp was arranged on two occasions, and the interviews were held with participants from both. One month after the summer stay, a reunion was arranged for each group. The interviews that this study focuses on were conducted within six months after each group's stay. Hence some of the participant had been to the reunion when the interviews were made while others had not.

All interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, except three that were conducted at the researcher's workplace. Before the interviews started, all participants gave their written consent to participate. The interviews took between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Data analysis

The interviews were analyzed as a “pool of meaning” in line with phenomenographic analysis (Marton & Booth, 1997) and carried out in four steps (Marton, 1994). The analysis was conducted manually to enable familiarity and intimacy with the interview data.

In the first step, the analysis of the 19 interviews started with reading the texts several times, in combination with listening to the recordings to make sure that the interviews were correctly transcribed. Thereafter, each transcript was repeatedly read as open-mindedly as possible in order to identify statements relevant to the aim of this study. Notes were taken during the reading.

In the second step, the statements were compared to identify similarities and differences in the ways the informants described the phenomenon. Distinct statements were labeled and from these labels preliminary conceptions were formed.

In the third step, the conceptions were compared with one another in order to obtain an overall map of how these similarities and differences could be linked. Preliminary descriptive categories emerged in the process and were named.

In the fourth step, the focus was on the relations between the preliminary descriptive categories. These descriptive categories were critically scrutinized to check that they were in accordance with and represented by the overall conception. Finally, through interaction between the parts and the whole, three descriptive categories based on similarities and differences emerged as the main findings. The findings are presented in an outcome space with a horizontal structure (Table 1).

In this study the bracketing (van Manen, 1997) has been done throughout the whole research process thinking actively of reflexivity. However, the reflexive approached has been particularly evident in the construction of the interview guide using semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions. The reflexive approached has also been evident during the analysis of the data. Thus, descriptive categories and conceptions was discussed between us three researchers, they were also changed a few times before we could agree upon them (as described by Bruce et al., 2004). Also, the empirical data are presented with quotations that illustrate the basis for the analysis making the research process as transparent as possible.

**Table 1.** Descriptive categories and conceptions.

Descriptive categories	Mitigating loneliness		Developing as a person			Gaining inspiration	
	Conceptions						
	Creating new relationships	Finding courage to participate in new activities	Getting self-confidence	Changing one's attitude to life	Belonging to a context	Being physically active in everyday life	Finding joy in life



## Results

Three descriptive categories emerged: “Mitigating loneliness,” ‘Developing as a person’ and ‘Gaining inspiration,’ which include seven conceptions. The conceptions are illustrated with quotations from the interviews.

### *Mitigating loneliness*

This descriptive category brings together two conceptions in terms of mitigating loneliness: *Creating new relationships* and *Finding courage to participate in new activities*.

#### *Creating new relationships*

After the stay, most of the participants described that they often had been alone and had felt lonely before they went on the senior summer camp. Going away for several days and socializing with strangers was not something the participants usually did in everyday life. The older adults described that it was important to meet new acquaintances when you grow old so that you are not isolated, but rather get new contacts and fellowship with other people. This insight became clearer to the participants after the summer camp.

It came as a relief somehow to get away. To see something else and get to talk to others who you didn't know at all before. Have someone to keep in touch with. In that way it was probably very useful to me. I feel now that I needed that. I think that when you are this old, you need company, you need someone to talk to. (Jenny)

Many participants expressed that the summer camp offered a change from a rather monotonous and lonely everyday life. The friendships they gained with other participants meant that they now had made new friends with whom they continued to keep in touch even after the stay. The participants had a common purpose and had looked forward to meeting new acquaintances at the summer camp that they could socialize with when they got home. That way, many of the participants wanted the same thing. In addition, this experience helped them to gain a greater understanding of their own situation.

This [Senior summer camp] gave me a lot. I don't have that big a circle of friends. I think it affected me. I became more positive by getting new contacts. It was really fun that my new friends called when we came home, both of them, and then we've gotten together as well. (Maud)

For participants who had been lonely for a very long time it was not that easy to make long-lasting friendships during just the one week of the senior summer camp.

I have not met any of them now after the summer stay and I have not seen anyone out on the town either. They did not take the initiative and neither did I. There must be someone suggesting it in that case. (Harriet)

They were not discouraged by this, however, but instead looked forward to the reunion that was arranged a few weeks after the summer camp. They saw this as their chance to be able to make contact and exchange numbers with some of the other participants.

### ***Finding courage to participate in new activities***

Several of the participants had not done things on their own for a long time, and they did not trust themselves to be able to do so. They described that after the summer camp they gained confidence and realized that they could do things on their own. Some older adults went to the opening of a senior fare and also took the initiative for a trip on a shrimp boat on the lake. They had not dared to try these activities before, so the stay at the senior summer camp had made them feel energetic again.

I actually went out on that shrimp boat. So that I've done after the summer stay. I was inspired to do so. I've never done that before even though I have lived here for 15 years.  
(Olga)

Some described that after the summer camp, they were inspired to come outside of their own homes a little more often. They found new courage to resume old interests and reach out to old acquaintances with whom they had lost touch. Going to a spa hotel alone was another new activity that some of the participants did after the summer stay.

I went to . . . last week and was dropped off by my son at Selmas Spa Hotel. . . . I would not have done that if I had not been on the summer stay. (Olga)

Many of the participants expressed the same thing, namely that loneliness no longer prevented them from doing what they wanted. Thus, several participants described that they, for example, were inspired by painting, which was an activity at the summer camp. As a result, some of them started a painting course. Some others went out to a dance for seniors. Some participants have met at a restaurant on several occasions.

### ***Developing as a person***

This descriptive category brings together three conceptions in terms of developing as a person: *Getting self-confidence*, *Changing one's attitude to life* and *Belonging to a context*.

#### ***Getting self-confidence***

Several of the participants did not trust themselves to be able to do things. They described that after the summer camp they had gained confidence and realized that they could do things on their own. This is an insight that several

of the participants described. Many perceived that they had improved their self-confidence, had grown as a person and had strengthened their self-esteem. And this affected them in different ways.

It has affected me positively. You could tell after a day that you were more content with yourself. I manage to take on things. You got to broaden your horizons, so much to experience and feel. And the whole atmosphere. It was positive to be among so many people. (Karla)

The participants described that they experienced a mental change. The change was only noticeable when they came back to their own home after the summer camp. They felt an inner harmony, a sense of contentment, and were satisfied with themselves and their own situation.

What I didn't realize until a few days after I had come home was how insanely good I felt, both physically and mentally. How I had rested in a different way. It was a real eye-opener. I was so happy and content with myself and sat on the balcony and thought oh God how good it was. (Torsten)

Many of the participants expressed that being at the senior summer camp was some kind of healing experience. They became more satisfied with their lives and began feeling confident and having faith in the future.

### *Changing one's attitude to life*

Several of the participants described that they previously had had the attitude that life does not have much more to offer when you grow old. After the summer camp, their outlook on life changed and they felt that there is much left to experience.

What I think has been good is that I have come to realize that there are fun things to do even when you grow old. That there are things to look forward to even though you get older, which I didn't think before. (Daga)

The participants reported that the summer camp had had a positive impact on them, and they were now, after the stay, beginning to think in a different way. They wanted to make a difference and do something meaningful with the rest of their lives. They described that they got a different attitude to life, wanting to take care of things and do fun things for as long as they could.

Because I've been thinking that I am not going to go on like this my whole life. I'm going to turn 88 but still. I can't imagine that I will go on like this until I die either. I want to do something else before I die. ... Yes, in many ways I think differently now. You don't know how much time you have left. You have to make the most of the time you have. I think about that a lot now that I've come home. (Maud)

Several of the participants described that they had had a gloomy picture of life before the summer camp. Many described that they had lacked the spark of life and that everyday life was boring and consisted of waiting for death to come.

They were so limited by what they could no longer do that they did not do anything. However, at the senior summer camp they were challenged by activities that they never thought they could do. They were also inspired by one another. For example, one of the participants had a belief in the future and an enthusiasm for life. This inspired another participant to also have faith in the future and be able to see a greater joy in life.

There was a lady who had just bought an allotment and she was over 90 years old. I would have thought that you don't need to become older than 70 years. It's not that much fun anymore. Now I think that you feel a little happier and I see that it can be a little fun after all even though you get older. . . . I got a little more zest for life. You can feel that you are scared of getting bad and not managing. Now I think most things are fun. (Olga)

The future for many participants meant worrying about losing more abilities or becoming ill. For some this was paralyzing, hindering them from making plans. Being at the senior summer camp they realized that they had just been waiting for the end, but now they instead wanted to live life.

### *Belonging to a context*

The participants described that the experiences of the summer stay have led them to dare to believe in their own abilities and have the courage to make contact with other people that they had not known before. The participants believed that this change in confidence was due to the experience of having been at the senior summer camp. The stay put them in a larger social context than before, which helped them feel like they were a part of something. Everyone was equally important in the group and just being you was enough of a contribution.

I came home from the summer stay and was content and happy. A very nice week. After all, nobody was on their own there, you were a group then. So, it was precisely that you were in a context there. Your kind of had, were appreciated and . . . When you are in a social context like that. I had that with me when I came back. (Freja)

Belonging to a group was a feeling that many of the participants had not felt for a very long time, as most of the participants had experienced loneliness and isolation in their homes. Being at the summer camp made them feel important in the group and they were expected to contribute to the community. This feeling continued for many of the participants after returning home. They got a different view of themselves, thinking that they also are important people who can contribute with their experiences and knowledge in contact with others.

I felt that I could be myself, dare to believe in myself and not have to be somebody else. (Maud)

This experience at the stay, that they could contribute and be a resource in a group, helped them to see their own value as humans even after the stay – that there is nothing wrong with them just because they experience loneliness.

### ***Gaining inspiration***

This descriptive category brings together two conceptions in terms of gaining inspiration: *Being physically active in everyday life* and *Finding joy in life*.

#### ***Being physically active in everyday life***

Many of the participants appreciated the gymnastics at the summer camp and said that they had gained new insights about the importance of keeping up and moving. The participants described that they had improved their fitness and mobility after the summer stay, and most said that they felt better and were in better physical shape. Some said that they had gotten better in their legs and exercised by walking. Several of the participants described that they were reminded of the importance of exercising in everyday life after having been at the summer camp; some started exercising at home and some exercised more often now than before. It affected their well-being and they felt stronger and more alert.

The stay has affected me. I have understood that it is important to keep up with the exercise. I work out more now than I did before. Go out for a walk and keep the balance and things like that. It's a wonderful feeling and enriches your life. (Lena)

In many ways, several of the participants described that before the stay at the senior summer camp, they had given up on life a bit. Many of them described that they did not even believe they could exercise as they only focused on their inabilities, not on their abilities. However, understanding how they could incorporate exercise into their daily lives, many felt an improvement in their quality of life.

#### ***Finding joy in life***

The summer camp has altered the participants by making them feel more cheerful and happy. They described that it was uplifting to get away from home and that it was a break from everyday boredom. They described having positive thoughts and enjoying the memories as they thought back to the summer camp.

Several of the participants said that there was a good atmosphere in the group and that the stay had created pleasant memories. The participants described how they looked at pictures and recalled the fun they had had. They also described that whenever they met someone who also had been at the summer camp, they talked about what they had experienced together.

The summer stay has meant a lot to me, to get out and meet others and get to do fun things with others that you like. That week I really livened up and I have that with me now that I've come home. (Carl)

They had experienced much that they had not expected. Many felt privileged to be able to stay in a hotel with full board and a three-course dinner every day. In addition, there were fun and educational activities. They said it was a unique experience that was important for their well-being and changed their way of viewing life and the time left.

## Discussion

Our main findings illustrate in different ways how the participants felt that the stay at the summer camp had impacted their lives afterward, within six months of the stay. Three descriptive categories emerged from the empirical data: “Mitigating loneliness,” ‘Developing as a person’ and ‘Gaining inspiration.’ Our findings show that the experience of participating in the summer camp has had a lasting impact on the older adults.

Several of the participants described that they experienced social, emotional and sometimes even existential loneliness before the stay. Their description is consistent with Weiss (1973) research findings that social and emotional loneliness can be explained by the lack of friends with whom one can feel connected, whom one can turn to in confidence. The participants also described experiences of existential loneliness, of feeling disconnected from life.

Our results show that all participants described a need to belong to something or someone. Being given the opportunity to meet new acquaintances and form deeper friendships with others after the stay was of great importance to them. The stay at the summer camp seems to have given the participants more confidence and more strength to make changes in their lives (Wallroth et al., 2021). Kitzmüller et al. (2018) believe that an engine is needed, an incentive that can break the experience of loneliness in older adults. Our results show that the summer stay has been a turning point that has led to several of the participants making new friends whom they meet regularly. After the stay, some also felt encouraged to contact old friends with whom they had lost touch and some found it easier to try new things and engage in new activities. Many participants expressed that the stay had made them experience more meaningfulness and more joy in life. Similar results can be found in Van Hees et al. (2020) who show in their study that engagement in social and voluntary activities has positive outcomes for physical health and mental well-being.

Our findings show that it is important for older adults to participate in meaningful activities that reduce the experience of loneliness. This can explain why the summer camp, which had the theme of health and quality of life, became an eye opener for the participants, where they received help to develop their own view of what quality of life meant to them. This is in line with Atad and Caspi (2020) who similarly show that meaningful activities for older adults improve well-being. The findings of our study show that the participants’

experiences during the summer stay have affected them afterward, both physically and mentally. They value highly that they have realized that they have the opportunity, the choice, and the ability to contact other people to reduce their loneliness, which several of the participants also have done. They have autonomy over their situation. Larsson et al. (2019) argue that having a balance between power and protection is important for experiencing a good quality of life. Several researchers maintain that well-being among older adults is linked to realizing that one is able to influence one's everyday life (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

After their stay at the summer camp, the participants in our study describe that they have undergone a personal change on several levels, which has affected their everyday lives after their return home. Many feel rested, more satisfied with themselves and have gained a mental strength and inner harmony in their lives. One participant describes it as a "mental healing process." They describe that they have a zest for life and that they could be themselves. This is in line with Bolmsjö et al. (2019) who show in their research that it is important to eliminate the feelings of existential loneliness, which can be an experience of being disconnected from life and the universe, that many older people experience.

Existential loneliness was prevalent among the participants before the stay. The older adults described it as though they did not have much to live for anymore when they were so old. Our findings show that the stay provided new insights and experiences about the meaning of life. They realized that there were fun things to do even though they were old, and they gained a belief in the future and a positive outlook on life. It gave them the belief that it is possible to live a meaningful life and to use the time they have left to do something meaningful. Sjöberg et al. (2019) show similar findings, namely that having a good quality of life is linked to having good relationships, feeling loved, being cared for by others, and furthermore being able to accept one's life history. Larsson et al. (2019) find that the quality of social contacts is important for reducing feelings of loneliness, having someone to turn to in confidence and share experiences with. Robertson (2019) also shows the importance of more emotional connections and quality of relations for older adults later in life, rather than just increasing the number of social contacts.

The findings demonstrate that challenging oneself and having the courage to go on the summer stay has led to gaining more self-confidence and believing more in one's own ability to cope with things. James et al. (2014) suggest that it is important to have control over one's life and to perceive that one can make one's own decisions.

The stay has impacted the participants' everyday lives after returning home and they have been reflecting on what can change in their lives. They experienced that their fitness improved because the stay included physical activity,

they were in motion a large part of the day. This is in line with other studies that show the importance of older adults having a meaningful everyday life and an active life to feel good (Gilmour, 2012).

The participants gained the insight that it is important to be active, work out and exercise. Several started working out at the gym and going for walks. They became happier and looked more positively on life. This is in accordance with what Van Hees et al. (2020) concluded in their study, namely that involvement in social activities, employment and voluntary activities are particularly beneficial for older adults, as this has been shown to give positive results on physical health and mental well-being.

### **Study strengths and limitations**

A strength of this study is that older adults themselves talk about their own experiences, and how their participation in the summer camp has changed habits in everyday life after their stay. A limitation is that the study only includes four men. Milligan et al. (2015) suggest that older men might be particularly vulnerable to becoming lonely. Another weakness that can be highlighted is that the study has not succeeded in capturing any critical voices. One criterion for participating in the summer camp was that the older adults had to have a desire to change their life situation and break their experience of loneliness. Given that the participants had a desire to change their life situation, this could explain why most of them had a positive experience. The positive outcomes thus need to be considered against this background.

### **Conclusion**

The participants in this study describe that after a week of summer camp, their lives are altered on many levels, both physically and mentally, six months after the stay. They gained better self-confidence and a positive attitude toward life – that life is worth living and that there is a lot to experience, even if they are very old. They have made changes in their lives and describe that they have had a more meaningful everyday life and improved quality of life. The results show the importance of arranging events for older adults with a similar purpose as the summer camp in this study. It has influenced how the participants organize their everyday life after the stay. Our results also show the importance of breaking the negative spiral where older adults experience loneliness, isolation, and that the spark of life has disappeared. Social activities for older adults, such as senior summer camps can contribute to better health and prevent the development of various disease states caused by loneliness.



We would like to take a moment here to also explain explicitly how the results of this study can contribute to current knowledge and practice in gerontological social work. Summer camps for older adults are very different from other activities organized by municipalities. First, it is a journey, i.e., an opportunity to get a break from everyday life, it offers a change of scenery and to mitigate boredom, find friends and get to know them on a deeper level. Second, several activities during the summer camp also challenged the participants to do things they did not think they had the capacity to do, such as being physically active. This also gave several good health effects even after the summer camp. Clearly, the municipalities in Sweden can do more for older people in terms of complying with the Swedish Social Services Act (2001: 453), stating that “all older adults should have an active and meaningful life in community with others.” The meaning of this legal text is that every municipality has an obligation to ensure that older persons should not be alone against their own will. However, offering older adults who feel isolated and alone a week’s summer camp is of course costly both financially and in human resources. At the same time, this study shows that a week’s summer camp had good health effects even six months after the trip and that several of the participants were able to mitigate their loneliness. More studies are however needed about the effects of senior summer camps for older adults as well as studies that examine costs in relation to health effects to be able to ensure a responsible use of tax funds.

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