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THE IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPIRITUALITY ON HEALTHY AGING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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The purpose of this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was to understand the impact of Physical Activity and Spirituality on Healthy Aging.

The analyzed studies suggest that the practice of physical activity and spirituality, when combined, can positively impact healthy aging as these two variables can contribute and enhance the cognitive, physical, social, and psychological functioning.

Keywords: *healthy aging, physical activity, spirituality*.

IMPACTUL ACTIVITĂȚII FIZICE ȘI A SPIRITUALITĂȚII ASUPRA SĂNĂTĂȚII LA VÂRSTNICI: O ANALIZĂ SISTEMATICĂ A LITERATURII

Scopul acestei revizuiri sistematice a literaturii (SLR) a fost de a înțelege impactul activității fizice și al spiritualității asupra îmbătrânirii sănătoase.

Studiile analizate sugerează că practicarea activității fizice și a spiritualității, atunci când sunt combinate, pot avea un impact pozitiv asupra îmbătrânirii sănătoase, deoarece aceste două variabile pot contribui și îmbunătăți funcționarea cognitivă, fizică, socială și psihologică.

Cuvinte-cheie: *îmbătrânire sănătoasă, activitate fizică, spiritualitate.*

Introduction

There is a vertiginous growth of the elderly population worldwide, and it is estimated that in the next 40 years, 22% of the population will be 60 years old or older [1]. Concomitantly, greater longevity is observed, notably, centenarians [2].

The practice of physical activity is associated with better physical and mental health, better cognitive function, better sleep pattern, and prevention of all aging-related diseases, such as dementias and Alzheimer's disease [3].

As a contributing variable in the process of Healthy Aging, the WHO [4] has recognized the importance of Spirituality, which seems to positively interfere with both social, psychological and physiological factors [5].

Methods

In this work, the combinations of the terms write this review article is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Synthesis of the descriptors used, and the number of studies found

Number of studies found	Combination of descriptors and Booleans
13	(healthy AND aging) AND (physical AND activity) AND (spirituality)
17	(healthy AND aging) AND (physical AND activity) AND (religion)
5	(healthy AND aging) AND (religion) AND (exercise)
6	(positive AND aging) AND (exercise) AND (spirituality)
8	(positive AND aging) AND (physical AND activity) AND (religion)
10	(positive AND aging) AND (exercise) AND (religion)

The guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses PRISMA-Search (PRISMA-S) (Extension to PRISMA Development Protocol) methodology [6] was adopted as can be seen in Figure 1.

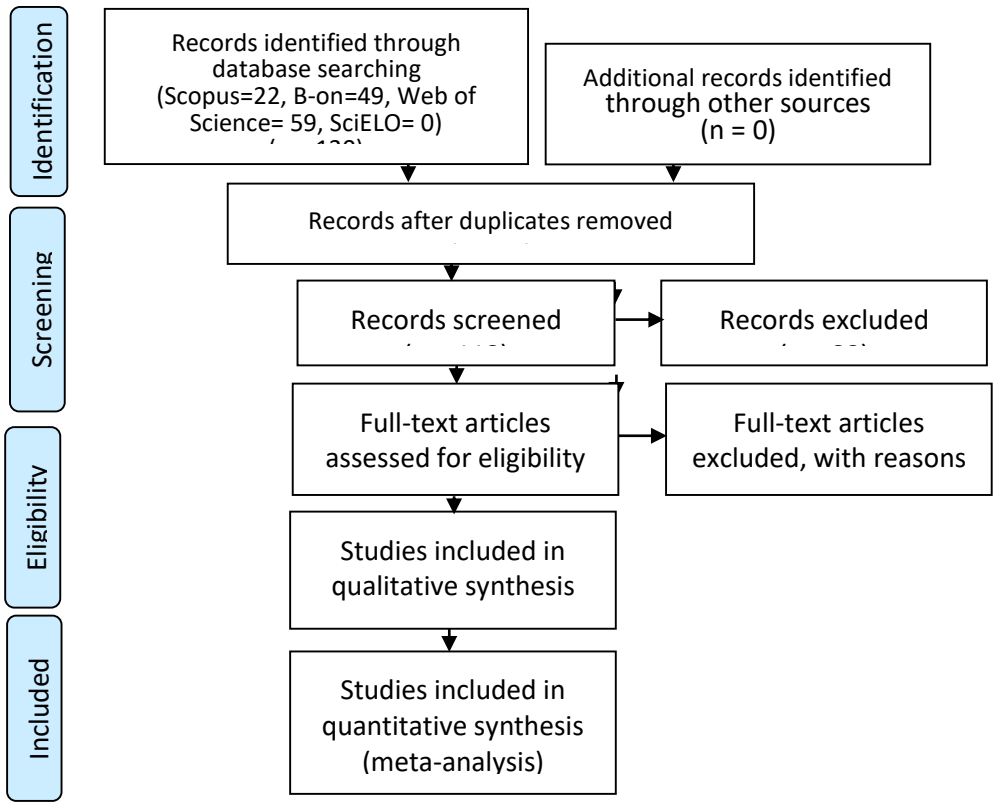


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the articles' selection process

Results

Most authors of the articles selected for this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) converge on the WHO description regarding healthy aging, particularly regarding the fact that, in addition to the absence of disease, the focus is on providing dignity to the elderly through public policies (health, education, financial stability), enabling the elderly to be a participatory individual, responsible for their physical, mental, social, and spiritual health, which, in turn, leads to or constitutes healthy aging [4, 6, 7].

The practice of physical activity may be fundamental as a preventive measure against aging-related diseases, or even for those who already had some type of chronic disease [8-10]. In fact, the practice of physical activity seems to have a positive impact on the subjective perception of health of the elderly. Individuals who did not exercise were 21% more likely to develop smoking behavior, compared to those who engaged in regular physical activity [11]. Physical activity was said as an important determinant of achieving good health [8].

It was noticed that the association or combination of physical activity and spirituality seems to have a promising protective effect against Alzheimer's risk [12], then when considering the effect of these variables alone.

In general terms, it was found in the analyzed studies that many of the elderly knew about the positive effects of healthy aging related to physical activity and spirituality. However, the studies were not convergent as to whether knowledge of this positive impact was a motivational condition for the practice of physical activity or spiritual activity [13, 14].

Finally, the religion and the practice of physical activity are suggested as health-protective variables, allowing adherence to health-beneficial behaviors, and avoidance of behaviors that may cause harm to health [11].

In the absence or encouragement to continue the practice of physical activity, for the sake of healthy aging, it was proposed to the elderly who perceived spirituality as fundamental in their lives, to demonstrate the importance of physical activity for the continuation of the practice of spirituality, based on the benefits that the practice of a physical activity brings to the individual.

Discussion

The analyzed studies suggest that the practice of physical activity and spirituality, when combined, can positively impact healthy aging, as these two variables can contribute and enhance the cognitive, physical, social, and psychological functioning.

As it was verified in the studies [8] that the increase in the practice of physical activity itself seems to have benefits in the daily life of the elderly [9, 10].

As for religious practice and activities related to it, the research seems to support the advantages in its adoption/practice, by promoting (here the scenario before the pandemic COVID is referred to), frequent meetings, where it was perceived the establishment of routine, conviviality and socialization, in addition, to the benefits of spirituality perceived by the elderly.

The practice of spirituality and the practice of physical activity have been shown to be incongruent to adherence, to behaviors detrimental, to physical health [11, 14]. However, having information about beneficial health behaviors is not enough for adherence [14].

The studies suggest more effective intervention programs for the elderly, in order to make them aware of the importance of being self-responsible and active for their health. In this regard there seems to be a need for improvement of existing programs, asking health and education professionals to develop more attractive programs, better suited to the age group and their limitations: auditory, motor, visual, etc. [8, 9, 14].

One last note regarding the limitations faced, namely the relatively limited number of studies from the last century to the present, regarding the age group concerned with what the WHO indicates as elderly. Thus, there was a difficulty of analyzing a larger number of studies. For this reason, the American indications of the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), which considers the age for studies of the elderly to be from 50 years of age onwards, was included.

It can be thought that the more the age ranges are narrowed, more specific data to propose interventions that are more appropriate for each age group can be found. Age sub-divisions were found in only 2 of the 7 analyzed articles, but no proposals were made in this regard.

Despite the few articles selected in this SLR, the ethnical, geographical, financial, cultural, spiritual variety were counted positively, which may suggest that the issues raised are universal, whereby physical activity practice and spirituality may be variables to be studied in unison to better understand their impact on aging.

More qualitative and quantitative studies in innovations of interventions, where the two variables present themselves in the life of the elderly, for instance, it can be promoted in two distinct ways, firstly, the variables observed in a separate individual way, such as the practice of physical activity and spirituality with regular activities [10]; secondly, studies that promote the two variables coexisting at the same time [13] can be conducted.

Conclusions

Overall, the elderly can be benefited in their aging by the intersection of the practice of regular Physical Activity and Spirituality.

There is much work ahead in understanding how to promote healthy aging, with so many cultural and religious nuances, where innovative strategic measures come to meet the aging population. it is worth noting that the respect for the individuality of the elderly.

It can be suggested to conduct more studies that address the physical activity and spirituality, and the inclusion of more combinations of variables, such as nutrition, socialization, among others, in a diversity of types of studies (qualitative and quantitative). Better direction of action/interaction can lead to broad understanding of healthy aging, whether in ourselves, in those around us, or in serving the people in a society.

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