

# Thriving in nursing homes in Norway: Contributing aspects described by residents

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## Abstract

*Background and objectives:* Knowledge about residents' perception of what contributes to well-being and thriving in nursing homes is scarce. The aim of this study was to investigate mentally lucid residents' perspective on what contributes to thriving in a nursing home.

*Design:* A qualitative study with a descriptive-exploratory design.

*Settings:* Two nursing homes in Norway.

*Participants:* 26 mentally lucid nursing home residents.

*Methods:* Data collection comprised participant observation and open-ended interviews.

*Results:* Two core aspects contributing to thriving were identified: The residents' attitude towards living in a nursing home and the quality of care and caregivers. The residents' attitude was the innermost core aspect. Five additional aspects contributing to thriving were identified: Positive peer relationships, participation in meaningful activities, opportunities to go outside the ward or nursing home, positive relationships with family, and qualities in the physical environment.

*Conclusion:* Several factors contribute to an experience of thriving. The findings challenge the 'traditional' passive role of residents by documenting their active contributions to their level of thriving in a nursing home.

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*Keywords:* Nursing homes; Nursing home residents; Residents' attitude; Residents' perspective; Thriving; Well-being

## What is already known about the topic?

- The concept of thriving is described as a process of growth and development and as an emotional state of satisfaction or psychological wellbeing.
- Quality care, family and peer-relations, participation in activities and a nice and pleasant environment

contribute to well-being among residents in nursing homes.

- An attitude of 'making the best of it' and having a legitimate reason for nursing home admission can make it easier to settle down and come to terms with life in a nursing home.

## What this paper adds

- In a nursing home context, a perception of thriving is the result of person-environment interactions that

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accommodate the individual needs and preferences of the residents.

- Mentally lucid residents hold different attitudes towards living in the nursing home, which are decisive for whether or not they thrive.
- The impact of quality care on the experience of thriving depends on the resident's mental attitude towards living in the nursing home.

## 1. Introduction

A main objective of nursing homes is to make the residents' lives as good as possible in spite of their health problems, reduced level of functioning and extensive dependency. To make nursing homes a place for 'thriving, not just surviving' (Tremethick, 1997) has been proposed as an ideal goal (Bergland and Kirkevold, 2001; Slagsvold, 2000; Sosialdepartementet, 2003). Nevertheless, research has repeatedly described nursing home life as uneasy (Shield, 1988), constraining and dehumanizing (Fiveash, 1998), and characterized by loneliness, boredom and helplessness (Slama and Bergman-Evans, 2000). The term 'failure to thrive' has been introduced to capture unexpected and unexplained physical and mental deterioration among nursing home residents (Beattie and Francoeur, 2000; Bergland and Kirkevold, 2001; Hollinger-Smith and Buschmann, 1999). Originally, it was tied to organic causes. In recent years, psychosocial factors, such as loss of close relations, loneliness and helplessness (Beattie and Francoeur, 2000; Bergland and Kirkevold, 2001; Newbern and Krowchuk, 1994), as well as suboptimal interactions between the persons and their environment, have been proposed as possible contributing factors (Newbern and Krowchuk, 1994).

Although understanding 'failure to thrive' is important in order to identify, intervene or prevent unexpected and excessive decline, understanding its' positive counterpart, *thriving*, seems equally important in order to promote a good life among the residents (Bergland and Kirkevold, 2001; Haight et al., 2002). So far, little research has addressed this topic. In this paper, we report on a study in which we explored thriving from the perspective of mentally lucid nursing home residents.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of thriving has been explored from different theoretical perspectives, particularly in the social sciences (Bergland and Kirkevold, 2001; Carver, 1998; Petersen, 1995). In the following, thriving is described as a process of growth and development and as an emotional state, and related to relevant research on nursing home residents.

From a growth and development perspective, thriving is understood as a process and consequence of successful mastery of a stressful or adversarial event. It implies the effective mobilization of individual and social resources in the face of threat and results in positive physical, mental and/or social development (Carver, 1998). Applied to nursing home residents, it suggests that thriving residents have been able to adjust well to nursing home life. No nursing home research has been conducted explicitly from this theoretical perspective to date, but several research findings seem to be consistent with it. For example, Kahn (1999) and Daley (1993) found that an attitude of 'making the best of it' was important in order to adapt to nursing home life. This attitude made it easier to settle and come to terms with life in a nursing home. Similarly, Chenitz (1983) found that to accept a nursing home admission and settle down, residents had to have a legitimate reason for the admission and had to focus their energy on making life in the nursing home continuous with their previous life. These findings suggest that nursing home placement is a stressful and potentially threatening event. Individuals who are able to master this event in a positive way, may be assumed to grow and develop from the experience, be better prepared to deal with nursing home life and thrive in that context.

From an emotional state perspective, thriving is considered a state of satisfaction or psychological well-being, emanating from a positive balance between the expectations of the individual and the environment's capacity to meet the expectations (Petersen, 1995). From this perspective, thriving is a function of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment (Petersen, 1995). Indirectly, Newbern and Krowchuk (1994) seems to have worked from this perspective in their work on failure to thrive (FTT) among the elderly. They consider FTT to be the result of a deficiency in the interaction between the individual and the environment. Similarly, Haight et al. (2002) have proposed thriving to be an ongoing process of 'living life fully' (p. 16) and the result of an optimal interaction between the person and his or her human and non-human environment. To achieve a state of thriving from this perspective, nursing home residents have to adjust their expectations towards life in the nursing home in line with what is possible to achieve.

Few studies have specifically explored which factors contribute to thriving among nursing home residents. However, several studies underscore the importance of relationships with caregivers, family, friends and other residents (Grau et al., 1995; Guse and Masesar, 1999; Rantz et al., 1999). In addition, environmental factors, such as attractive, clean, spacious and homelike surroundings (Aller and Van Ess Coeling, 1995; Rantz et al., 1999) and having a private room (Guse and Masesar, 1999; Rantz et al., 1999) are important. When

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