

Sexuality in the Third Age: Perspectives from Porto with Psychologist Lúcia Maria Araújo

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For a sexuality that never ages

Talking about sexuality in old age is still, for many, a subject shrouded in silence, myths and constraints. The European project *Never Gets Old* was born precisely to break this taboo and promote a more open, inclusive and intergenerational dialogue on sexual health after the age of 60. To find out more about the Portuguese reality, we spoke to clinical psychologist Lúcia Araújo - a warm voice from Porto, who brings topics such as sexuality, mental health and the well-being of older people to her classes given within the *Reformers project*. Her fascination with sexuality in older age has been with her since her university days, so strong that it marked her training and thesis, always with an attentive and sensitive eye to the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Persistent barriers and ongoing changes

Asked about the main obstacles that older people face when talking about sexuality, Lúcia Araújo was clear: "Older people end up, especially those who grew up in conservative environments, being associated with a sense of shame or guilt, ending up experiencing sexuality as something embarrassing, something that should be hidden". And that's not all: "It's the stigma associated with sexuality. Therefore, the fact that our society still invisibilises or denies sexual desire and pleasure in all people, even more so in older people, ends up supporting the idea that sexuality is almost exclusive to younger people."

The psychologist points to a lack of safe spaces, which contributes to the silencing of experiences and the perpetuation of older people's doubts and insecurities: "This clear lack of safe spaces brings this feeling of shame, of guilt, which then ends up leading to a lack of adequate information." Lúcia Araújo also emphasises the need for more adequate and valid information on these issues and more training for those working with people 60+, whether in health, education or social care. In addition, her experience in Porto also reveals added challenges for LGBTQIA+ people: "LGBTI people who are older almost face, in my opinion, a double barrier which is age-related prejudice, the issue of ageism, but also prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity."

Positive and healthy sexuality

Lídia Araújo emphasises that the idea of *healthy sexuality* in old age needs to be demystified: "There is the question of affections, there is the question of love, there is the question of desire and therefore sexuality is not just about sex, so to speak." Healthy sexuality therefore also involves asking: what is sexuality for me? And what is it for the other person? These questions must be asked, regardless of age.

Lídia Araújo reinforces this idea. For her, sexuality is a continuous expression of identity and well-being: "Because we're already assuming that these people aren't going to have sex, aren't going to have love, aren't going to have pleasure, aren't going to have desire, and so they don't need it. There are myths and prejudices that need to be deconstructed. This is my vision of what I think should happen within a positive sexuality."

Education, listening and empathy

Throughout her various classes – on sexuality, affection, self-care, anatomy, sexual orientation and love in its various forms – the feedback from participants has been revealing. Many expressed a desire to talk about these issues and felt free when they realised that someone was available to listen to them without judgement.

The psychologist emphasises the importance of creating participatory environments where people feel encouraged to share experiences and ask questions. For professionals working with this age group, the psychologist leaves clear advice: "We all grow up with certain cultural models about what sexuality is – who can, what they can and can't do, how we should live. So, the first step is to realise that we also have prejudices and judgements. It's almost an exercise in critical self-assessment: 'I'm going to work with this person. What do I know about them? What are my personal judgements?'"

Creating an environment of respectful listening and promoting a welcoming space can be enough to make people feel free of judgement. "That's why I think this initial phase of critical self-assessment is so important," says Lídia Araújo. "I feel that just the fact that there are news and stories on the subject and that people have the opportunity to read them already reduces the associated stigma a little. And for me, that's already very positive progress. [...] Sexuality has no expiry date."

Towards the future with Never Gets Old

The interview confirms the urgency of initiatives like *Never Gets Old*, which goes far beyond raising awareness: the project includes specific training for professionals, dialogue sessions with older people, interactive round tables, educational videos and an online space for open debates - the "Let's Have the Big Talk" forum.

The next phase includes the development of the Intergenerational Dialogue Guide, which will be tested with professionals and people over 60 between September and October 2025. This will be followed by the Age Wise training programme, with capacity building and transnational training in Bordeaux, France, next year.

Conclusion

"I think that, initially, it's important to recognise that all generations have something to say."

The conversation with Lída Araújo leaves a clear message: to guarantee full and dignified ageing, it is necessary to recognise sexuality as an integral part of health. This means listening more, judging less and training professionals. Because, as the name of our project states, sexuality... Never Gets Old.

