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Becoming and Being Very Old: a Qualitative Study

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Introduction: In almost all Western countries more and more people are living to advanced age. This demographic change will lead to a society with many elderly people that are in good health and good condition and many very old people in poorer conditions and in the need for significant help.

Aim: Understanding the meaning of lived experience of growing very old with respect to losses and gains.

Methods: To reveal the meaning of becoming and being very old, the transcribed interviews were analyzed using a phenomenological hermeneutic method.

Results: The transcribed interviews of 15 Portuguese 85-year-old people were analyzed and disclosed growing old as: maintaining one's identity in spite of the changes that come with aging—that is, being able to balance change with feeling the same. This was based on four themes: balancing weakness and strength, balancing slowness and quickness of time, balancing reconciliation and regret, and balancing connectedness and loneliness.

Conclusions: Growing very old means to be dependent on others, this perhaps leads to frequent encounters with various caring organizations. Attitudes towards aged and aging in nursing are decisive for how the old person is met. Consoling care is to be open and available in the situation when meeting the old person. It is important to see the person behind the mask of aging.