

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Healthy aging interventions: exploring community partnerships to support Indigenous well-beingLynn LeVatte¹✉, Khaldoun M. Aldiabat²**Author information**¹ Department of Education, Cape Breton University, Canada² School of Nursing, Cape Breton University, Canada

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7/1/2025**Abstract**

A program named 'Walking Our Way to Wellness' was a healthy aging intervention developed and implemented in a rural Indigenous community. Focusing on interventions are valued and connected through both cultural and community models. This project emphasized the intergenerational aspects of health interventions. The research aimed to explore healthy aging practices, prevalent health conditions, health needs, and the impacts of a community partnership model involving a local post-secondary institution in Nova Scotia. This qualitative study included 17 participants who completed semi-structured interviews about their health and well-being. The mean age of the sample was 67 years, with 11 participants residing within the Indigenous community. A series of health interventions were developed based on participants' needs and interests through a community partnership involving a local Indigenous community, Cape Breton University Education Department, and the School of Nursing. These interventions included nutrition education, diabetes education, a walking program, and functional fitness programming. The results revealed that arthritis and diabetes were the most commonly reported health conditions among participants. Participants also noted their engagement in new functional fitness exercises and expressed that social interactions and scheduled classes were beneficial for their overall well-being. Suggestions for future research are also provided, which aim to build on the successes of this intervention and further explore the benefits of culturally grounded, community-driven health initiatives.

Keywords: Aging, health condition, innovation in community health, nursing, partnership**Introduction**

The public health actions have helped manage complex health challenges globally (Caron et al., 2023). Specifically, health promotion is a collective strategy that creates the right social and physical conditions to improve the determinants of health (Gallagher et al., 2021). Various contributing factors, such as obesity, diabetes, smoking, alcohol abuse, and inadequate health care coverage, have been noted as significant challenges (Piovani et al., 2022). A study documented that 40.4% of people had hypertension, followed by diabetes (31.2%), arthritis (22.1%), heart disease (7.8%), sensory impairment (10.1%), and dyslipidemia (7.0%) (Chobe et al., 2022). Aging itself is also a major risk factor for many age-related diseases (Carrillo-Alvarez et al., 2023). As individuals age, they not only desire to live longer but also wish to support a healthy aging process (Abud et al., 2022). This dual desire has led to extensive research into community-based partnerships aimed at enhancing health outcomes. Furthermore, collaborative approaches that involve community residents in joint decision-making processes are essential for maintaining or improving individual health needs and programming, which ultimately supports these needs (Obi et al., 2024). Given that communities possess unique resources and assets, they are ideally positioned to contribute to the development of local health and well-being initiatives.

One such initiative is the "Walking Our Way to Wellness" program, which focuses on healthy aging by combining evidence-based lifestyle interventions (LeVatte & Aldiabat, 2023). The program aims to improve participants' ability to age in place at home through lifestyle modifications, including exercise, cognitive stimulation, and social interaction. Exercise is a cornerstone of healthy aging, addressing both physical and mental challenges (Eckstrom et al., 2020). As individuals age, they often experience a natural decline in muscle strength, bone density, and joint flexibility increasing the risk of falls (Cai et al., 2024). A study emphasizes that engaging in regular physical activity can improve improving musculoskeletal health (Grabara, 2023). Additionally, aerobic exercises such as walking, swimming, or cycling can enhance cardiovascular function, regulate blood pressure, and reduce the risk of age-related diseases. Beyond physical health, exercise has

significant cognitive and emotional benefits which is crucial for maintaining memory as the brain ages (Pujari, 2024). Cognitive decline is a common concern in aging, with many individuals experiencing reduced memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities over time (**Figure 1**). Therefore, cognitive stimulation plays a vital role in mitigating these changes by encouraging brain activity through purposeful and engaging tasks. A "Walking Our Way to Wellness" program is a promising strategy to help the elderly maintenance the cognitive function. However, this program is less the evaluation about the effectiveness from the patients. This study was informed by the World Health Organization's (WHO) statement, "healthy places, healthy people," which emphasizes the significance of the physical form of the built environment and the quality of the natural environment in which people reside (Sorrell, 2006).

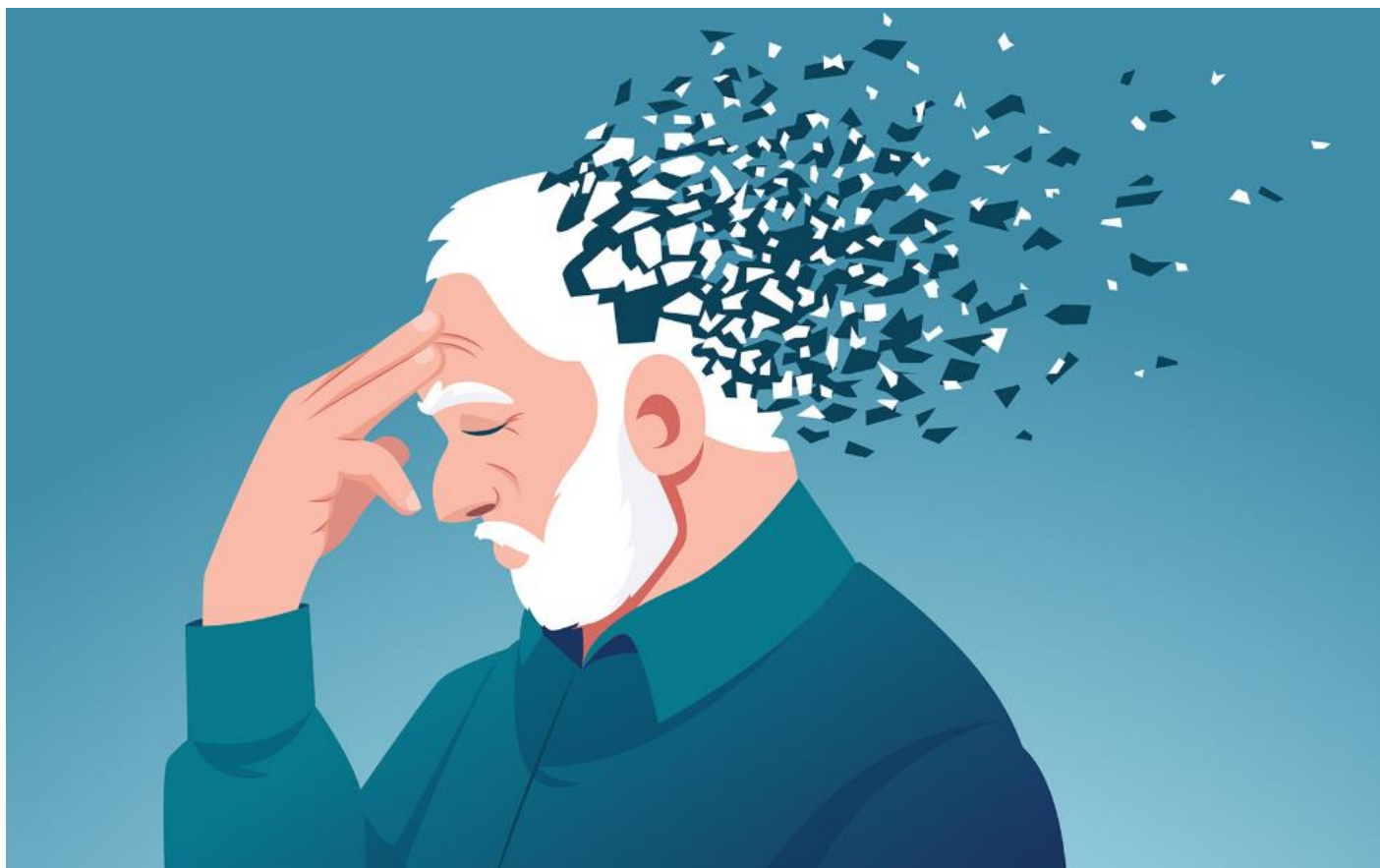


Figure 1. Illustration of cognitive decline (Courtesy of [www.istock.com/ Feodora Chiosea](https://www.istock.com/FeodoraChiosea)).

To confirm that community interventions can effectively build on existing capacities, it is critical to focus on programming and access to community resources (Agrawal & Abimbola, 2024). This study examined community partnerships and aimed to enhance healthy aging interventions, including nutrition, disease prevention, functional fitness, balance, and disease management. Despite these findings, there remains a gap in understanding the long-term effects of such programs on cognitive health and frailty among diverse populations, particularly in Indigenous communities. The urgency of this study is underscored by the rising prevalence of age-related diseases and the need for effective care. Exploring the outcomes of the "Walking Our Way to Wellness" program can contribute valuable insights into effective strategies for fostering healthy aging in underserved communities. This study is particularly important in the context of qualitative research because it provides rich, in-depth insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of Indigenous communities regarding healthy aging. Focusing on community partnerships, this study employs qualitative methods to capture the nuances of cultural practices, social interactions, and values that contribute to Indigenous well-being. It allows for an exploration of how traditional knowledge and community dynamics influence aging processes and how interventions can be co-designed to reflect these unique contexts. The qualitative approach also gives voice to Indigenous elders and community members, ensuring their experiences and preferences are authentically represented. This is critical for

addressing systemic inequities, fostering culturally safe care, and creating health programs that are both meaningful and impactful for Indigenous populations. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how qualitative inquiry can illuminate pathways to more inclusive and effective health interventions.

Method

The study employed qualitative research, which is crucial in educational and health research as it addresses the “how” and “why” of research questions, enabling a deeper understanding of participants (Renjith et al., 2021). Qualitative research involves posing questions that do not necessarily relate to numerical data but focus on interpersonal and human experiences (Cleland, 2017). Individual participants were recruited through community partnerships with the local Health Centre and through advertisements in community buildings and on social media platforms hosted by the community partner. Invited partners for the project intervention sessions were guided through interviews and needs assessments based on health requirements. All instruments for data collection were validated by the authors before the study commenced. These instruments included the standardized mini mental state assessment (SMMSE), the mini nutrition assessment (MNA), & the staying independent assessment falls risk assessment. The research team identified and invited community partners, successfully recruiting four (n=6) community health partners, including a local post-secondary institution (Education and Nursing), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Canada, a diabetic educator and dietician, a chiropractic and family wellness center, a kinesiologist, and the community Indigenous health center (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Data and health collection (Documented by authors).

These community partners and allied health professionals delivered twenty health education sessions as an intervention to address the healthy aging needs identified by participants. The sessions covered topics such as specific nutrition and menu planning for conditions related to heart disease and diabetes, along with physical activities focusing on balance, functional fitness, flexibility, and strength training. General health promotion sessions on bone density and functional activities for healthy aging were also conducted by both Chiropractic team members and a kinesiologist. Additionally, participants completed risk assessment testing for frailty. Data was collected from 17 participants using a semi-structured open-ended survey, which asked them to respond in writing. The survey questions were anonymous, ensuring no identifying information was linked to their experiences in the program, the health benefits they gained from participation, and how they could continue to practice a healthy active lifestyle after completing the program. Participants were encouraged to write as much or as little as they wished in response to the questions and were given one week to return their written answers after the research team confirmed the confidentiality of their data and the anonymity of their identities. The qualitative content analysis followed a six-step process (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Step 1: participants' written answers were read multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of their narratives, identifying key ideas and main points (e.g., positive experiences, negative experiences, advantages, disadvantages, benefits, impact, facilitators, and barriers). Step 2: the text was segmented into smaller units called meaning units. Step 3: these meaning units were further condensed to distill their essence while preserving the original meaning conveyed by the participants. Step 4: the condensed meaning units were assigned labels and formulated into codes. Step 5: the codes were organized into categories. Step 6: the categories were refined to establish overarching themes (Table 1).

The trustworthiness of this study consisted of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish credibility, the authors engaged extensively with the subject matter during the project and data collection, consulted with peer researchers, and employed reflexivity and bracketing to set aside prior knowledge about the topic. Dependability is inherently linked to credibility (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007), emphasizing that credibility is a prerequisite for dependability; thus, there can be no dependability without credibility (Aldiabat et al., 2023). For confirmability, the authors meticulously documented the research process, including methods for data collection and analysis, as well as project activities such as discussions, brainstorming sessions, feedback, and reporting. To achieve transferability, the authors immersed themselves in the data and crafted a thick description, enabling others in similar contexts to relate to and apply the study's findings. Ethical approvals were granted by the Research Ethics Board at Cape Breton University and the Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch Review Committee for data collection from participants for research purposes. Participants signed informed consent at the beginning of the program, with the voluntary option to withdraw from the program or not participate in the research.

Results

This study explored healthy aging interventions within the community, with 17 participants attending 20 healthy aging sessions. The findings highlighted the role of community partnerships in supporting healthy aging within an Indigenous community. These partnerships were pivotal in providing access to healthcare services, health promotion activities, and opportunities for active aging. Key collaborators included the community health center, a local post-secondary institution, the YMCA, and various allied health professionals, such as a diabetes educator, chiropractor, registered dietitian, exercise physiologist, aqua therapist, and registered nurses. The study also presented three themes: physical improvement and persistence, new experiences and physical strengthening, social connection and novel activities (**Table 1**).

Discussion

The study documented that participating in healthy aging activities within a community indoor walking track, as part of the "Walking Our Way" project, proved to be a significant intervention for promoting healthy aging. Walking in a controlled environment, such as a sports center, offers numerous benefits for older adults, including improved cardiovascular health, better balance, and enhanced physical endurance (Ungvari et al., 2023). Participant 3 illustrated the impact of this intervention, stating, *"When I started, I could not walk a full lap, but I took my time and each day did more steps."* This statement highlights the incremental nature of physical activity progression, a key factor in building endurance and confidence (Ortega-Gómez et al., 2023). According to Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy, individuals' belief in their ability to perform a task directly influences their motivation and persistence. In this context, the participant's gradual improvement in walking distance exemplifies how small, consistent achievements can enhance self-efficacy, leading to sustained physical activity and improved health outcomes, such as stronger physical functioning, reduced fall risks, and better mental health (Bandura, 1997; Acree et al., 2006; McAuley & Blissmer, 2000). Healthcare professionals play a pivotal

role in leveraging innovative technology to support and enhance self-efficacy among older adults. For example, integrating technology into health interventions can create personalized and adaptive tools that track small, consistent achievements, providing immediate feedback and encouragement to users (Agudelo-Botero et al., 2023). For instance, wearable devices and mobile health applications can monitor walking distances, step counts, and physical performance metrics (Felberbaum et al., 2023). Such technologies allow older adults to visualize their progress and celebrate incremental improvements. Additionally, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies can offer immersive and engaging environments for exercise, transforming routine activities into enjoyable experiences that motivate continued participation (Rodríguez-Almagro et al., 2024). Remote monitoring systems and telehealth platforms enable healthcare professionals to provide timely guidance, adjust activity plans, and address individual concerns. Furthermore, it ensures that older adults receive tailored support even in remote or underserved areas (Serrano et al., 2023). Importantly, healthcare professionals must collaborate with technologists, designers, and community stakeholders to ensure that these innovations are accessible, user-friendly, and culturally appropriate, especially for Indigenous communities. Nurturing digital literacy and empowering older adults to use these tools can bridge the gap between traditional care and modern technological advancements. Ultimately, fostering a sense of accomplishment can strengthen physical and mental health along with promote independence in aging populations (Figure 3).

Table 1. Study findings.

Themes	Quotation	Description
Theme 1: Physical Improvement and Persistence	<i>Participant 3 illustrated the positive impact of this intervention, stating, "...when I started, I could not walk a full lap, but I took my time and each day did more steps."</i>	This theme highlights participants' determination to improve their physical capabilities through consistent effort. It reflects gradual progress and the motivational impact of tracking small, incremental achievements.
Theme 2: New Experiences and Physical Strengthening	<i>Participant 2 shared their experience, noting, "This was the first time I attended a pool session like this, and it was really great to walk in the water and build my leg strength...I can feel it already."</i>	This theme emphasizes the excitement and benefits of engaging in unfamiliar activities, such as aquatic exercises, which contribute to physical strengthening and overall fitness. It captures participants' sense of accomplishment and enthusiasm for trying something new.
Theme 3: Social Connection and Novel Activities	<i>Participant 5 emphasized the social aspect of aquatic exercise, stating, "I enjoyed travelling to the pool with the group...it was something that I had never tried before, that was good."</i>	This theme explores the role of group-based exercises in fostering social interactions and reducing isolation. It also underscores the value of engaging in unique activities within a supportive social context, enhancing both emotional and social well-being.

In addition to walking exercises, the project included aquatic exercise, particularly water walking, which is increasingly recommended for older adults. The unique properties of water, such as buoyancy and resistance, reduce stress on joints while simultaneously engaging muscles. Studies show that aquatic exercise improves muscle strength, balance, and overall functional capacity in older adults (Taylor et al., 2021; Junior et al., 2018; Bento et al., 2012). This type of exercise is especially beneficial for those with arthritis or other musculoskeletal conditions, as it enables pain-free movement while providing effective resistance training (Takeshima et al., 2018). Participant 2 shared, *"This was the first time I attended a pool session like this, and it was really great to walk in the water and build my leg strength... I can feel it already."* This reflection highlights both the immediate physical benefits of aquatic exercise and its role in enhancing lower body strength. The participant's enthusiasm also underscores the importance of introducing novel, engaging activities to maintain motivation and adherence to exercise programs among older adults (Collado-Mateo et al., 2021). The "Walking Our Way" project also

demonstrated that group-based physical activities contribute significantly to psychosocial well-being. Social interactions within group settings help reduce isolation, promote emotional well-being, and enhance overall life satisfaction among older adults (Hinman et al., 2007). Participant 5 emphasized the social benefits of aquatic exercise, stating, “*I enjoyed travelling to the pool with the group... it was something that I had never tried before, and that was good.*” This sentiment illustrates the dual advantages of group-based interventions: physical engagement and social connection. Traveling and participating in a novel activity with peers fosters a sense of community and belonging, which has been shown to enhance adherence to exercise programs and improve psychological resilience (Smith et al., 2017). The novelty of the experience, coupled with the supportive social environment, likely contributed to the participant’s overall satisfaction and willingness to continue participating, thereby improving their quality of life (Bruner & Spink, 2011; Beudart et al., 2019).



Figure 3. Illustration of aging activities (Courtesy of www.pexels.com).

This study offers a unique perspective on the potential of group-based physical activities to promote healthy aging by integrating physical improvement, novel experiences, and social connections. Unlike traditional interventions that focus solely on physical outcomes, this approach emphasizes the synergistic benefits of combining physical activity with emotional and social well-being. Additionally, the project utilized a collaborative approach to designing healthy aging interventions within an Indigenous community. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) serves as a framework for engaging Indigenous communities to inform health policies, collaborate for self-governance in health, and advance community-based health initiatives in Canada (Bao et al., 2020). Participants from the Indigenous community worked alongside local health managers and partners to identify and address gaps in healthy aging programming. The findings underscore the importance of persistence in fostering physical improvement, showing that even small, incremental progress can lead to significant health benefits (Musich et al., 2017). This suggests that incorporating variety into physical activity programs can be a critical motivator for older adults (Wickramarachchi et al., 2023). The study

also highlights the transformative role of social connections in group exercise settings. Reducing isolation and promoting a sense of belonging address both physical and psychosocial dimensions of aging. Furthermore, these insights advocate for reimagining physical activity programs for Indigenous older adults as holistic interventions that integrate physical, emotional, and social dimensions. Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of creating equitable opportunities for Indigenous health interventions. These initiatives should respect cultural values and address social determinants of health to promote self-determination (Stephens et al., 2007). This innovative community partnership—comprising Indigenous leadership, community health promotion providers, and academic institutions—demonstrates a model for fostering engagement and identifying health priorities. Such collaborations are critical for advancing sustainable, culturally relevant interventions that promote healthy aging and address health inequities.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of healthy aging for Indigenous populations and highlights the value of community collaboration and effective health partnerships. First, it underscores the critical importance of meaningful community engagement in developing and implementing health programs tailored to the unique cultural and social needs of Indigenous communities. Secondly, the research revealed the specific needs and priorities of Indigenous communities concerning healthy aging, such as the integration of traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and holistic approaches to wellness. Lastly, this study adds to the growing body of literature on community-based healthy aging programming delivered within Indigenous contexts. Given the promising findings, future research is recommended to build on this work by incorporating larger sample sizes and more diverse Indigenous communities. Such studies could explore the long-term impact of community-driven interventions on physical, mental, and social well-being. Furthermore, comparative studies across different regions or cultural groups would provide a broader understanding of how tailored interventions can effectively address the diverse needs of Indigenous populations. These efforts would help establish evidence-based practices that can be scaled and adapted for other Indigenous peoples worldwide.

Author declaration

Both authors made equal and substantial contributions to all phases of the study, including conceptualization, design, data collection, analysis, and result interpretation. They worked collaboratively to draft, critically revise, and approve the final manuscript, ensuring its accuracy, coherence, and adherence to scholarly standards. This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Research Ethics Board and Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch at Cape Breton University on 27 November 2023. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

AI statements

No generative-text artificial intelligence tools were utilized during the process of writing this manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

All data are available from the authors.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interest. The funders had no involvement in the study's design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation, nor in the writing of the manuscript or the decision to publish the results.

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Authors' perspective

Innovation points

- The importance of interventions addressing the unique needs in the context of indigenous communities.
- The study emphasizes the collaborative approach involving community partnerships.
- Indigenous well-being in Canada focuses on addressing health disparities and promoting relevant strategies.

Potential areas of interest

- What specific healthy aging interventions are being implemented to address the unique needs of Indigenous communities in Canada?
- How do community partnerships contribute to promoting Indigenous well-being and addressing health disparities in the aging population?
- What cultural considerations are integrated into these interventions to ensure they align with the traditions and values of Indigenous peoples in Canada?

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