



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Module: Relationships and Intimacy

### Introduction and description

As developmental theories acknowledge, one of the central tasks of early adulthood is to build and maintain close personal relationships that entail intimacy. Newer approaches in developmental psychology and life span science emphasise the life-long processes related to close personal relationships from birth to death. In this vein, there is much evidence that social motives, preferences, and needs change across adulthood in response to age-specific and environmental opportunities. One consequence is that intimacy, closeness and emotional exchanges in personal relationships alter in later phases of adulthood.

In most European countries, a diversity of new forms of partnership and romantic relationships has evolved over the past decades. In the first half of the 20th century, traditional marriage constituted a prevailing model of romantic partnerships. In particular for younger woman there was hardly an alternative to marriage or singlehood. Today, in contrast, there exist a diversity and plurality of different models of partnership and romance from early to late adulthood, including models of living together, and models of living together without marriage. With regard to their sexual and social life, most individuals can freely decide between a variety of life styles, such as marriage, registered partnership, cohabitation ("concubinage") or consolidated love affairs.

Moreover, modern life styles are multifaceted, and entail same-sex partnerships, mixed-sex partnerships, partnerships with separate households, as well as long-distance romance. In spite of such diversity, not much is known about the distribution and prevalence of different forms of partnerships and romantic relationships. Regardless, to maintain a happy everyday life together is important for most satisfied couples. This involves shared activities, granting space and dignity to each other as well as mutual trust and supportive exchanges. In later life, tenderness, next to sexuality, is an essential part of any intimate relationship (Muller, 2014).

In the course of a relationship, partners will have to find and maintain a positive balance between intimacy and distance, especially if relationships change, for example, due to critical or loss-related events in life. One such critical and "inevitable" transition is retirement. In such circumstances, existing roles at home and in partnership will have to be adapted, and organized a new.



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Key definitions

### ***Partnership***

Partnership means both, a sexual and social relationship of two humans, thus, all long-standing sexual relationships. Regardless of the chosen legal form of a relationship, the sexual orientation of the partners involved or conditions of household and domicile.

### ***Intimacy***

Intimacy (Latin intimus; literally most distant from the outside, closest to the inside) means a relationship of profound intimacy. Today the word intimacy in colloquial language is often considered in the context of sexual contact. Intimacy, however, includes physical as well as social, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of life.



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Unit 1 (of 4): Relationships and intimacy

### Introduction

The development of older people is individually different. Indeed, this group shows more differentiation/individualisation when compared with earlier phases of life and is thus a less homogeneous group. Nonetheless, social relationships in later life are often subject to two stereotypes that are still deeply entrenched in public discourses. First, the notion of a crumbling of social and familial generational solidarity, second, "loneliness in later life" as a subject for negative images related to old age.

A central element of social integration in any phase of an individual's life is positive and meaningful social relationships. Close relationships are known to contribute to wellbeing throughout life and old age is no different. Support from, and satisfaction with, social networks shapes happiness with life (Bennett & Riedel 2013). While wide social networks are important, having at least one close confidant is sufficient to contribute toward wellbeing, particularly when progressing through medical treatments (Meyer 2000). Positive social relationships are therefore of utmost importance for the availability and impact of social support, especially, when an older individual needs help and care.

Four main criteria characterise social relationships in later life (Höpflinger 2014):

1. Most spouses share one household, thus acting as first supporters for each other in everyday life. Most other social relationships to relatives and friends are subject to the "distant intimacy" principle.
2. Familial relationships versus non-familial ones: relatives are considered more important than friends. For instance, older people have more intense contacts to their own grandchildren than to other children or adolescents.
3. Relations to family are given, to friends freely chosen.
4. Age groups are generally considered in terms of generations.

### Key messages

- Humans choose, influence and change their immediate environment and thereby their social relationships, regardless of age.
- Older people show more differentiation/individualisation when compared with earlier phases of life and should therefore not be treated as a homogeneous group.
- Essential parts of an intimate relationship in later life are tenderness and sexuality.



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Learning objectives

At the end of this unit students are expected to:

1. Understand the meaning of old age characteristics and be able to reflect on one's own personal views of age and ageing.
2. Appreciate the importance of social networks as instrumental supports for older people, which impact their success in negotiating socio-medical interventions.
3. Understand and support the importance of intimacy and sexuality in later life as an essential part of an intimate relationship.

## Content

### *Case Study*

Carl (75), a former carpenter, and Sophie (74), a former translator, have been married for forty-five years. They are currently enjoying their retirement and leisure time to travel and engage in sports activities. As their children have families of their own and live further away, Carl and Sophie spend the vast majority of their time together. They have rediscovered tenderness (for example holding hands while taking walks) and intimacy to be of great value for their relationship. Sophie says, she feels “young and more alive compared to when she was working”. After Carl suffered from a back injury that required hospitalisation and a long recovery period in which Sophie had to support him, they both decided to invest in their physical health and took to hiking “to be able to keep up with the grand-children when they visit and go on trips with the church retiree group”. Moreover, they decided to enjoy sexual activity “as long as they still can”.

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. How would you describe Carl and Sophie’s life? How could you characterise the relationship between 1) both the partners and 2) other people in their social environment?
2. Are there any aspects you found surprising while reading the case study?
3. How does your impression of their relationships differ from your personal experiences with/or your expectations regarding older people?



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Unit 2 (of 4): Sexuality with/without partner

### Introduction

Sexuality in the third age calls for a broader understanding of the meaning of sex. For instance, sexual activities beyond sexual intercourse can be more important here, such as masturbation or caressing each other. Sexuality in later life is determined by biological (physical state), psychological (cognitive efficiency, personality, behaviour), social (social relations, partnership, family), and ecological/contextual (housing conditions, infrastructure, finances) factors (Gatterer 1994). Nonetheless, sexuality amongst older people, especially older women, is often a taboo subject. In part, because in western society, where there is a tendency toward a view of “eternal” youth and thus there is often a “double standard of ageing”. This frequently means that women – more so than men – are sooner regarded as unattractive, old and asexual. Yet, for older people sexuality is a pleasurable, rewarding and enriching experience. This can mean that the views of an individual, group or society can often be formed around contradictions, frequently as a result of ignorance.

Studies show that sexual activity of women as well as men decreases in later life.

Nonetheless, while women between 18 and 40 years are sexually more active than men, this development changes in later life in favour of men. In cases of persons older than 60 years, twice as many men as women are sexually active (Unger & Brähler 1998). The most important influence on sexual activity is the presence or absence of a relationship.

Notwithstanding a missing relationship, social disadvantage, such as early unemployment, low income or questions around domicile have a negative influence on sexual activity in men. Sexual activity in later age can also decrease due to physical and hormonal changes.

The ILSE study “Interdisziplinäre Längsschnittstudie des Erwachsenenalters” (interdisciplinary longitudinal study of adult ageing) that has been running since 1993 and, which examines questions about the importance of sexuality and intimacy in later life, identifies tenderness as the decisive factor for a satisfying relationship (Müller, 2014). For example, while sex played an important role for 61% of the men and 21% of the women in this study, 91% of men and 81% of women aged around 74 years said that tenderness in their relationship was of prime importance. As such, tenderness proved to be the most relevant factor for a satisfying relationship in old age.

As noted, the absence of a partner is often the main reason for a reduced sex life in older age. This can be a particular challenge for women, since men tend not to live as long. Moreover, only around one third of the women who are single are ready to enter into a new relationship (Schultz-Zehden 2004).



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

Self-stimulation or masturbation is a variety of sexuality of its own, particularly when there is no partner. According to Butler and Lewis (1996) masturbation is practiced up to very old age. Indeed, some people start regular self-masturbation only in later age, often because they do not have a partner or they are physically impaired. Older persons should not be discouraged by negative social age stereotypes and it should be remembered that in every phase of life, new experiences and encounters can lead to an enriched sex life.

## Key messages

- The sex life of older people, in particular older women, often remains a taboo subject.
- Studies show that sexual activity decreases for women as well as for men when they get older. Nonetheless, sexual activity remains important for a fulfilling life.
- Studies identify tenderness to be the decisive factor for a satisfying relationship.
- One of the main reasons for a reduced frequency of sexual activities in later age is the absence of a relationship.

## Learning objectives

At the end of this unit students are expected to:

1. Understand factors that can present obstacles to sexuality amongst older people.
2. Recognise the manner in which sexuality may change in later life.
3. Appreciate how societal attitudes can be reflected in considerations of sexuality amongst older people.

## Content

### *Case Study*

Martin (78) and Louise (76) have been in a relationship for 18 years, after they were both widowed. They live next door to Louise's daughter's family in a small countryside home. The family frequently have meals together. Martin and Louise have always enjoyed sexual activity together and lately realised changes regarding both of their needs when being intimate with each other. Due to medication Martin was prescribed for a heart condition, he realised he had become less fit for physical effort, including sex. Louise on the other hand has reluctantly detected she is forgetting names and having difficulties in mastering activities such as writing a grocery list. Therefore, her partner and her daughter have both been worried about her wellbeing, which led her daughter to involve herself more in the



## Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

daily life of her mother. The couple has realised that they might need to adjust their intimacy and sexuality to these new circumstances.

### *Discussion Questions:*

1. Identify factors that influence Martin and Louise's sexuality. What additional factors might be important when considering sexuality and older people?
2. Imagine Martin and Louise wanting to sustain their (intimate) relationship. How could they adjust to their life circumstances?
3. Consider relationships among older people in your community. What elements do you consider would be most important for satisfaction and dissatisfaction. What might you consider most valuable in a relationship as you become older?
4. Sexuality in later life tends to decrease. Consider how factors you identified in the case study above might contribute to this?



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

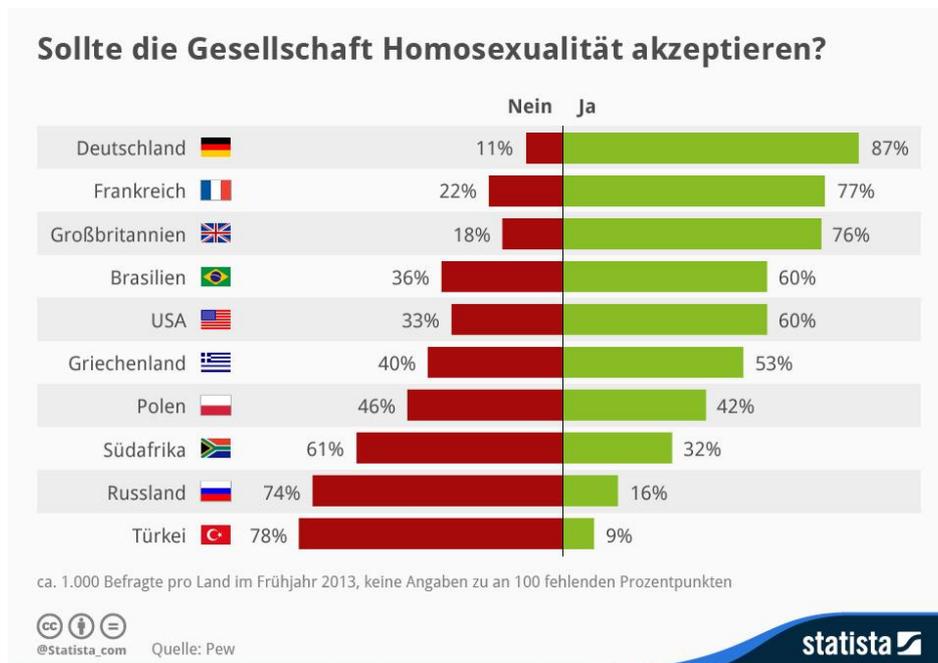
## Unit 3 (of 4): Homosexuality / Same sex issues

### Introduction

Homosexuality means a sexual orientation where the erotic and romantic desire is mainly directed to persons of the same sex. The respective identities are lesbian or gay. Gay is the synonym for male, lesbian for female homosexuality. The sexual orientation of a human is part of their personality and identity. In spite of growing acceptance of homosexuality, many older lesbian women and gay men still lead a social double life. This is often no different in institutions that care for older people and often homosexual individuals have to hide their sexual identity for fear of being excluded. In addition, homosexuality is often a taboo subject amongst older people themselves. Thus, older homosexuals may often live in social isolation and suffer loneliness.

The diagram below provides an indication of attitudes toward homosexuality from a cross-country perspective.

Diagram 1: Results of a survey on the social acceptance of homosexuality in different countries.





# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Key messages

- The subject of homosexuality still is a taboo in many countries, particularly amongst older people.
- Older lesbian women and gay men often lead a social double life and can become socially isolated more easily.
- In Western Europe gay and lesbian people are generally more accepted than in Eastern European countries.

## Learning objectives

At the end of this unit students are expected to:

1. Understand that homosexuality is often a taboo subject amongst older people.
2. Appreciate the particular challenges that older homosexual individuals may confront.
3. Recognise that significant variation, informed by cultural and religious attitudes, shapes views of sexuality across countries.

## Content

### *Case Study*

Elise (79) and Anna (80) are moving into an assisted living facility for older people together, as they need help managing their daily life. They made the decision to move out of their flat, which they had shared for many years and to seek external help while maintaining their autonomy. In spite of having lived their lesbian relationship openly in the past, they worry about the perception of their relationship in this new environment. Some friends have suggested that they should not mention it to anyone in their new living arrangements, until they have assessed the prevailing attitudes.

### *Reflective Questions*

1. Why do you think friends have advised Elise and Anna to keep their relationship a secret? Would you give the same advice? Why/Why not?
2. Do you think it is important for Elise and Anna to live their relationship openly? What reasons would you provide to them?



## Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

3. Imagine an instance in which Elisa and Anna might need full-time care or need to transfer to a nursing home. What further challenges, if any, do you think are likely to occur for them as a couple?



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Unit 4 (of 4): Relationship changes (due to age)

### Introduction

In the course of a relationship intimacy and distance must be balanced again and again, especially if relations change, for instance, due to a new event in life. One common such life event is retirement. At retirement the existing roles at home and in a partnership must be adapted or organised anew. Other changes in life due to increasing age, such as ill-health or the loss of the partner, children moving out or changes of domicile usually also entail alterations in relationships.

Amongst older people, one commonly experienced change is retirement. This can lead to more intense closeness. For instance, couples may have more time and have less distractions of everyday life, which can allow them to carry out new projects together, and there are also new possibilities with regard to sexuality. At the same time, more time together can emphasize underlying problems or conflicts.

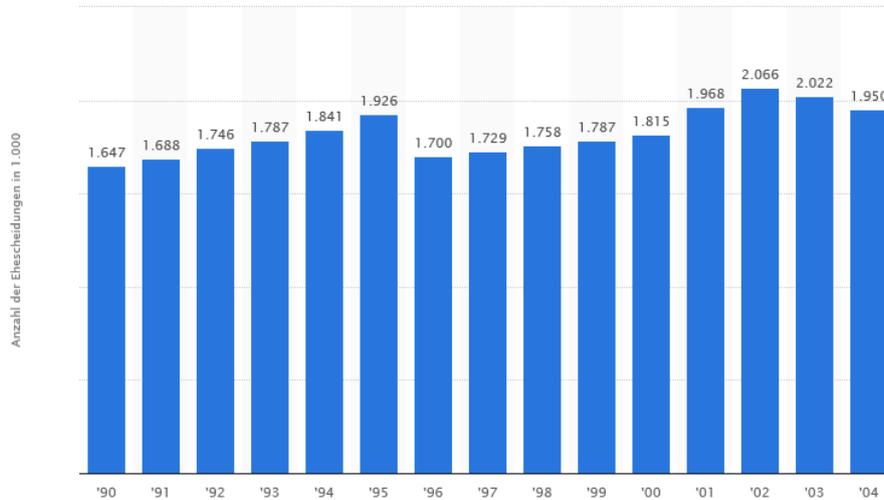
This may be one reason that divorce rates after the silver wedding anniversary (25 years of marriage to the same partner) have doubled in the last two decades. Unsurprisingly, separation and divorce are radical changes in relationships, which can have considerable implications, regardless of age. In many cases, there may be separation without formal divorce, as divorce can have legal consequences in relation to pensions, inheritance or property rights and so some couples may choose to live separately without divorcing.

The following table displays the number of divorce cases in Europe as a time series, from 1990-2004. In 1990 1,646,616 marriages were dissolved in Europe.



## Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)



Source: Statistisches Bundesamt

With increasing age the probability rises of losing a partner by death. Loss and mourning must be overcome and accepted. It can be hard for the surviving partner to build up a new relationship. People choose different ways when trying to come to terms with loss. Whereas some look for a new (sexual) partner, others lose the desire for a new relationship and intimacy. Where a new relationship is pursued, sexuality may not be discussed with the partners, for reasons such as embarrassment. On the whole, the manner in which people deal with grief and mourning have not been explored to any great extent.

Another change in relationships can occur when children move out of a household. This is often termed the “Empty nest-Phase”. The empty nest-phase not only brings structural changes to the family system, it also brings emotional, psychological and social challenges, which can have positive or negative effects on the lives and relationship of the parents. While traditionally, the post-parental phase was considered to be in the mid-adult age range of 40-60 years, trends of later first births, prolonged educational periods for children and increasing life expectancy have all shifted the range upward. Moreover, with increasing life expectancy, the post-parental phase can now last up to 30 years.

In a similar fashion, with increased life expectancy, one or both partners may find that they need to enter longer-term care in a nursing home. In general, most people wish to stay in their own home as long as possible. However, due to physical, mental or psychological ill-health they may not be able to attend to matters of personal hygiene, mobility, nutrition or general housekeeping and a nursing home may be the best option.



# Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

## Key messages

- New life events can bring new challenges and opportunities for older people, both in relation to sexuality and more broadly.
- Common life events that can be encountered are retirement, children leaving home (empty nest phase) or the death of a partner.
- Separation and divorce can be particularly challenging life events.

## Learning objectives

At the end of this unit students are expected to:

1. Be aware of the common life events that can accompany ageing and have an appreciation of the challenges and opportunities these can bring.
2. Understand how models such as the Selective Optimisation and Compensation (SOC) model can contribute to decision-making around goals and responses to resource reductions.

## Content

The Selective Optimisation and Compensation model.

The Selective Optimisation and Compensation (SOC model) (Baltes et al 1998) posits that effective adaption and goal accomplishment that contribute to well-being are achieved through processes of selection, optimization and compensation. The process of selection concentrates on prioritising the most important goals to pursue, based on personal preferences (elective selection) or as a response to a resource loss (loss-based selection). In general, elective selection is focused on enhancing functioning, while loss-based selection is more focused on maintaining functioning in the wake of a resource loss, which can be income, health, mobility, social support or any resource from a relevant domain.

As older age tends to have fewer expectations attached to it, older people may have more latitude in the goals they wish to pursue. At the same time, older age can introduce resource constraints that limit the extent to which an individual can shape their environment according to their goals. Optimisation refers to employing the means and resources to secure goals, which commonly involves the investment of time and energy. In older age, pursuing growth related goals is particularly important, as it has been associated with positive emotions and enhanced well-being (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Nonetheless, as older age is often associated with resource reductions, it may be important to approach



## Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

loss-based selection by focusing on developing unused internal or external resources or pursuing alternative goals (Freund & Riediger, 2001; Ouwehand et al., 2007).

### Questions for discussion

1. What does the SOC-model state about older people's quality of life? Think of a diminished ability or competency that an older person might want to compensate for (e.g. biological, social). What might be a successful way for them to attain a related goal?
2. Imagine your parents were in the process of making a decision about their housing situation. Name at least three domains you would like them to consider when making this decision (for example their health). How can you as their child contribute to this discussion?
3. Think of your parents or another elderly relative. When would you advise them to reassess their accommodation? What reasons would you forward to help guide their decision? What thoughts and feelings do you think your relative could have about moving house?



## Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

### References

Baltes, P., & Baltes, M 1990, 'Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation', in P. Baltes & M. Baltes (eds), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioural sciences*, pp. 1-34. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Baltes, P. B., Lindenberger, U. & Staudinger, U. M 1998, 'Life-span theory in developmental psychology. In: Lerner R M (ed.) *Handbook of Child Psychology: Theoretical Models of Human Development*' (5th ed). New York: Wiley.

Bennett, J., & Riedel, M 2013, 'Was beeinflusst die Lebenszufriedenheit im hohen Alter?' Repräsentative Studie zur ambulanten Altenpflege und -betreuung in der Deutschschweiz, *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie + Geriatrie*, vol. 46. no. 1. pp. 21-26. Brähler E, Berberich H J. [Hrsg.] (2009). *Sexualität und Partnerschaft im Alter*. Psychosozial-Verlag Gießen.

Butler, R., & Lewis, M 1996, 'Alte Liebe rostet nicht: Über den Umgang mit Sexualität im Alter'.

Freund, A., & Riediger, M 2001, 'What I have and what I do: The role of resource loss and gain throughout life', *Applied Psychology An International Review*, vol. 50. pp. 370-380.

Gatterer, G 1994, *Handbuch der Gerontopsychiatrie. Rehabilitation*. Wien: Springer Verlag.

Höpflinger, F 2014, *Sozialbeziehungen im Alter – Entwicklungen und Problemfelder*. ([www.hoepflinger.com](http://www.hoepflinger.com)).

Meyer, P 2000, *Rollenkonfigurationen, Rollenfunktionen und Gesundheit. Zusammenhänge zwischen sozialen Rollen, sozialem Stress, Unterstützung und Gesundheit*, Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Müller, B., Nienaber, C. A., Reis, O., Kropp, P., & Meyer, W. 2014, 'Sexuality and Affection among Elderly German Men and Women in Long-Term Relationships: Results of a Prospective Population-Based Study', *PloS one*, 9(11), e111404  
<http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0111404> (10.08.2015)



## Health and Social Care Promotion Materials that Focus on Intimacy and Sexuality in the Third Age

[www.intimage.eu](http://www.intimage.eu)

Ouwehand, C., de Ridder, D., & Bensing, J 2007, 'A review of successful aging models: Proposing proactive coping as an important strategy', *Clinical Psychology Review*, vol. 27, pp. 873-884.

Schultz-Zehden, B 2004, Das Sexuelleben älterer Frauen - ein tabuisiertes Thema. Das Wissenschaftsmagazin der Freien Universität Berlin, Ausgabe 1/2004

Unger, U., & Brähler, E. 1998, Sexuelle Aktivität im Alter - Ergebnisse einer Repräsentativbefragung. In: Kruse, A. (Hrsg.) *Psychosoziale Gerontologie*. Band I: Grundlagen. Jahrbuch der Medizinischen Psychologie 15. S.238-252. Göttingen: Hogrefe.

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

