

Psychology of Successful Aging

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Abstract

The world's population is ageing rapidly. Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world's older adults is estimated to almost double from about 12% to 22%. Older adults, those aged 60 or above, make important contributions to society as family members, volunteers and as active participants in the workforce. Mental health and well-being are as important in older age as at any other time of life. Older people may experience life stressors common to all people, but also stressors that are more common in later life, like a significant ongoing loss in capacities and a decline in functional ability. In addition, older people are more likely to experience events such as bereavement, or a drop in socioeconomic status with retirement. All of these stressors can result in isolation, loneliness or psychological distress in older people, for which they may require long-term care. This research paper tries to explore mental health problems faced by older people and the stigma surrounding these conditions makes people reluctant to seek help. The increasing proportion of people growing old, demands expanded knowledge of how people can experience successful aging and the factors associated with successful aging.

Keywords: *Aging, Mental Health, Older Adults, Well-being.*

Introduction

With increasing number of older adults worldwide, promoting health and well-being becomes a priority for aging well. Well-being and physical and mental health are closely related, and this relation may become more vital at older ages as it may contribute to aging well. Advancing age is broadly associated with declining cognitive, physical and mental health, Whereas Successful ageing is about staying healthy and connected to a diversity of factors, such as psychological resources, life satisfaction, social participation, functioning and personal growth. Wellbeing is also linked to health and age and refers to how people experience the quality of their lives, comprising emotional responses, feelings of happiness, sadness, anger, stress, purpose and meaning in life. The process of successful ageing is about extending healthy life expectancy and quality of life for all people as they age, but it is also about optimizing opportunities for health and participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civil matters.

According to Foster & Walker (2015), Aging well is conceptualized using different contemporary theoretical frameworks in the last decades, including healthy aging, positive aging, productive aging, active aging, and successful aging. The state of well-being is a multifaceted phenomenon in the older population which generally involves happiness, self-contentment, satisfying social relationships, and autonomy. In old age, people experience profound changes and face important challenges, including modifications in their roles, retirement, and the death of loved ones (friends and family members). These experiences can increase their levels of stress and lead to a decrease in the resources that individuals feel they have in dealing with their daily lives (Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2014).

Factors Contributing To Successful Aging

➤ Physical Factors

According to Depp & Jeste (2006), the most predictive factor of aging well is the absence of cigarette and alcohol abuse. Also, exercise is a powerful determinant for aging well, along with better self-rated health, and fewer chronic medical conditions (i.e. arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, etc.). A healthy Body Mass Index (between 21 and 29) at the age of 50 is also an important factor of successful aging

➤ Psychological Factors

Low rates of depression and high rates of resilience are now consistently identified as being as important as physical health in determining who will age successfully (Jeste et.al, 2019). Psychological resiliency is often defined as an individual's ability to properly adapt to stress and adversity.

Pietrzak et. al (2014) explained that having purpose in life is an indicator for healthy aging for several reasons, including its potential for reducing mortality risk. People that have mature (adaptive) defenses from the age of 20- 50 (e.g.. humor, suppression, and anticipation) are also more likely to age well than those that utilize more immature defenses, like projection and dissociation.

➤ Social Factors

The most cited social factor as a predictor of successful aging is a happy marriage. This social factor has consistently been identified as a predictor of successful aging. Those with a greater social support and more social contacts are also more likely to age well (Yaffe et. al, 2009).

Another social factor that has been identified as a predictor of aging well is higher education. Those with higher levels of education, particularly college degrees, are more likely to age successfully. Education is often cited as a protective factor against psychological decline, but it could also be that people with higher education are more likely to have held well-paying jobs, thus allowing them greater access to resources like healthcare than their peers

A Wide range of mental health problems that affect older adults including the following:

- Adjustment to the stressors of late life: Decline in health, loss of loved ones, and relocation to a new living situation.
- Anxiety disorders: Anxiety-related disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.
- Caregiving: Caregivers may suffer from depression, anxiety, substance abuse, anger, and stress-related health problems, including cardiovascular disease.
- Dementia: Loss of Memory and reduced cognitive abilities, impairment of mental functioning
- Chronic diseases: Multiple chronic medical conditions that often accompany aging, such as heart disease, stroke, and arthritis
- Depression: Symptoms of depression in older adults are often overlooked because they are inaccurately assumed to be a normal part of aging or may coincide with medical illnesses or life events that commonly occur as people age.

Review of Studies Relating Aging and Mental Health

Jeste et. al (2019) conducted a new study of older adults living in a senior continuing care facility, and also explore how distinctive factors, such as wisdom, loneliness, income and sleep quality, impact the physical and mental functioning of older persons. He and his researchers explained that for Healthy Aging, physical health correlated with both cognitive function and mental health. Specifically, cognitive function was significantly associated with physical mobility, wisdom and satisfaction with life. Physical health was associated with mental well-being, resilience and younger age. Mental health was linked to optimism, self-compassion, income and lower levels of loneliness and sleep disturbances. In modern society, aging persons do not necessarily receive the support of younger family members who can serve as caregivers. Younger family members have jobs and children to take care of, so older adults often have to choose between staying at home and feeling lonely or to move in a senior housing system. Their findings shed light on areas that need to be a focus for seniors to live full, enriched lives.

Halaweh et. al (2018) carried out a study to explore perceptions on aging well among older adults. A qualitative research design in the context of focus group discussions was used; seven focus groups were conducted including fifty-six participants (aged 63–81 years). Data were analyzed using a qualitative interpretative thematic approach. Three major themes were identified, “sense of well-being,” “having good physical health,” and “preserving good mental health.” The participants perceived that aging well is influenced by positive feelings such as being joyous, staying independent, having a life purpose, self-possessed contentment, and financially secured, in addition to be socially engaged and enjoying good physical and mental health. This study contributes to get a better insight concerning older adults’ perspectives on aging well. Enhancing physically active lifestyle, participation in social and leisure activities, healthy eating habits, having a purpose in life, and being intellectually engaged are all contributing factors to aging well. Vital factors are to be considered in developing strategic health and rehabilitative plans for promoting aging well among older adults.

The level of generalized self-esteem is a factor that is interrelated with the dimension of well-being in its physical, emotional, and psychological components (Fry and Debats, 2010). Longitudinal studies support the view that resilience traits, like self-efficacy, are protective in the later life stage (Smith-Osborne and Felderhoff, 2016) and that these beliefs are linked to stress resistance in the face of minor distress (i.e., anxiety and loneliness).

As pointed out by the American Psychological Association (2004) and Bonanno (2004), resilience is configured as a common response to losses and conditions of severe stress during the lifecycle. Concerning people's ability to deal with adverse conditions in the lifespan, the attention to the construct of resilience progressively increases in relation to Quality of Life in older people (MacLeod et al., 2016). Braudy Harris (2008), and recently, other authors (Wiles et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2015), have suggested that the construct of resilience is useful for understanding health in older people. It is a flourishing state despite adversity (Hildon et al., 2010), where, in the case of the elderly, “adversity” may be considered in terms of an increased frequency of life conditions that entail personal loss, inequalities, disabilities.

With advanced age, well-being might be adversely influenced by declining physical health and functioning due to age-related changes; older adults may consequently encounter more challenges in pursuing aging well (Spirduso, Francis & Macrae, 2005). Maintaining good physical health and functioning plays an important role in facilitating mobility and enables older adults to perform more integrated functional tasks which include activities of daily living, fulfillment of social roles, and recreational activities. Evidence suggests that better

physical functioning is associated with physical activity, an interaction that is positively reflected on physical and functional well-being.

Older adults are strongly concerned about cognitive health in terms of keeping a good memory and prevent cognitive decline. Therefore, cognitive functioning was addressed as a primary contributor to aging well (Bourassa et.al, 2017). Good cognitive health is linked to social connectedness, independence, and life activities, and it might be preserved and enhanced by maintaining an intellectually engaged and physically active lifestyle (Laditka et.al, 2009). Furthermore, having positive mental attitudes towards aging and one's capabilities may contribute to healthier mental health, higher level of satisfaction, and lower levels of anxiety and depression among older adults.

Preserving Good Mental Health For Active Aging

1. The vitality of maintaining good mental health was viewed as an important attribute to aging well (Halaweh et. al,2018) and it includes:
 - Staying alert: Being independent, having control over their own affairs, and being self-governing. Being mentally alert and having a good memory was mentioned frequently as an imperative dimension of aging well.
 - Having a positive attitude emerged as an important attribute to aging well and having positive attitudes towards own capabilities as older adults was reflected by fulfilling own ambitions and having a life purpose in pursuit of one's aspiration. Being positive was also connected with spiritual merits, having faith, praying, and trust in God.
 - Modes to keep good mental health including actions such as reading newspapers and books, watching TV and listening to the radio, eating certain foods like nuts, staying active, and playing mental games.
2. The active aging model as presented by the World Health Organization,2015 encompasses six groups of determinants, each one including several features:
 - Availability and use of health and social services (e.g., health promotion and prevention; continuous care)
 - Behavioral determinants (e.g., exercise and physical activity; drinking and smoking habits; feeding; medication)
 - Personal determinants (biology and genetics, and psychological characteristics)
 - Physical environment (e.g., safety houses, low pollution levels)
 - Social determinants (e.g., education, social care)
 - Economic determinants (e.g., wage, social security).

Final Remarks

Successful aging is not only the absence of chronic illness, but the perceived life satisfaction of the elderly person. People with high levels of resilience, low rates of depression, few years of substance abuse, and a good social network are most likely to age successfully and, perhaps most importantly, report high levels of life satisfaction into their golden years. The mental health of older adults can be improved through promoting Active and Healthy Ageing. Mental health-specific health promotion for older adults involves creating living conditions and environments that support wellbeing and allow people to lead a healthy life. Promoting mental health

depends largely on strategies to ensure that older people have the necessary resources to meet their needs, such as providing security and freedom, adequate housing through supportive housing policy and programmes to prevent and deal with elder abuse

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