

Successful Aging: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Life expectancy has increased tremendously today. People are living longer. They tend to experience biological and physiological modifications. Changes that are often directly or indirectly linked with 'growing old.' These could be linked with complex health issues and concerns. However, aging also brings with it greater opportunities that can give aging persons the chance to venture into new activities, renewed interest in enhancing their talents and interests, maybe getting back into completing their education, spending more time with families and giving back to society. This paper tries to define and highlight the importance of successful aging by presenting various theoretical perspectives and case profiles to corroborate the importance of successful aging.

Introduction

According to Wikipedia, Successful Aging comprises of three components. These include the avoidance of illness and disease; a capacity for high physical and cognitive function and social and productive engagement. The term successful aging gained popularity and relevance around 1987 when John Rowe and Robert Kahn put forth arguments to emphasize that what was often opined to be the impact of aging was effectively the impact of disease. They suggested that those aging successfully would show minimal deterioration in physiological functions while others would show decrements as a result of disease. (Rowe and Kahn, 1987). This definition, according to Masoro 2001 would appear to be very appealing as it indicates that aging is possible without the disease and significant deterioration that is often associated with it. It would not be wrong to say, however, that the number of people in this category would be very low.

Various theoretical perspectives have tried to explain the concept of successful aging. Among these is the Activity theory that indicates there is an effective relationship between the life satisfaction a person can feel and the level of activity s/he participates in. This in turn enhances adjustment and adaptation in later life and also improves the extent of positivity a person feels for himself and herself. This theory thereby claims that being active in whatever ways possible, be that physically or mentally, increases the level of happiness that the elderly can experience (Diggs, J. 2008).

The disengagement theory on the other hand focuses on social disengagement as a response from the elderly wherein they find it easy to relinquish the roles they had been playing by passing on the responsibilities to the younger generation. This voluntary release or social disengagement gives them a greater feeling of self worth. According to the disengagement theory, withdrawing from society and relationships and responsibilities may only be the natural process of aging.

Erikson, in his theory, focused on the concept of ego integrity versus ego despair. Evaluation of the life lived so far with the understanding that life has been socially useful and productive, fulfilling and satisfying gives a sense of ego integrity. However, if one senses failure, a feeling of being unproductive, a feeling that life should have been lived in an entirely different manner would give the feeling of ego despair. This could result in anger, depression and/or a feeling of wanting to withdraw into isolation (Martin et.al. 2014).

The Indian context presents four stages in the lifespan of an individual. Brahmacharya, the age of the youth, when they prepare themselves through an education, Grihastha where the individual focuses on family and work responsibilities as desired by society. The third stage is Vanaprastha, where there is a focus on the solitary, introspective life. It can be equated to the stage of retirement, when individuals may renounce all roles and responsibilities and pass them on to the next generation. This may give the person a feeling of freedom, wherein s/he can contemplate on the life they have lived so far. Sometimes there may be active

involvement in religion and related activities. The last stage is *Sanyassa*, which entails complete abandonment of power, responsibility as well as desires of all types (Ramamurti & Jamuna, 2010). Like Erikson, here too the concept of integrity versus despair may seem to emerge.

To understand these theoretical perspectives case profiles were carried out with detailed interviews and observations on elderly members who participated in the activities of an elderly group. These group members met regularly and engaged in social and creative activities. These activities gave them an opportunity to express themselves and find a platform for exhibiting their hidden talents and skills that were probably forgotten over a period of time when they were involved with household and professional duties and responsibilities.

Case Profiles

Some of the illustrations of the lives of the elderly are given in the form of case profiles.

Case 1: A 74-year-old male retired from running his own business

Gentleman lost his wife a few years ago and has two sons and a daughter who are all married. He has grown up grandchildren as well. He had a good business in his hey days. However, when the children got married and set up their own families, they moved to independent floors in the same house. Children also got busy in their work and family lives and could not spend much time with him.

He started feeling lonely and neglected. As a result, he ended up experiencing a lot of physiological and medical issues. His children initially looked after him but later on felt that a lot of this was only attention seeking behavior.

Issues between the daughter and sons arose due to the division of property and other assets. This caused a lot of stress and led to further emotional reactions. To find solace he started moving out of the house and joined some elderly groups. He would constantly talk about his own problems and often breakdown and cry. After sharing his experiences, he realized that he was not the only one experiencing such issues. Others in his elderly group also had similar stories to share.

He then started taking the initiative of organizing group meetings, going for picnics, travelling to nearby destinations and encouraged others also to join the group for fun activities. He also started writing skits and poetry, which he enjoyed reciting for all regularly. He also cooks delicious snacks for the group members and brings them for every get together. He has now taken up the leadership role and nudges others in the group to get involved and use their skills, talents and creativity effectively.

This has helped him tremendously. Now he is hardly ever seen complaining and deals with his issues and concerns, both physical and emotional effectively.

Case 2: A 77-year-old lady, supportive wife to a successful professional

She lost her husband when she was in her late 60's. She has two daughters; both of who were married and well settled in their families when her husband passed away.

She was independent and lived all by herself managing everything on her own. Her daughters would support her whenever required.

She joined an elderly group and took the initiative of offering her home to conduct regular activities with the elderly group she was a part of. She was like the queen bee and reached out to everyone in distress and became the mother figure for the group members both younger as well as older than her.

She was empathetic, ever smiling and provided advice to the group in general, for resolving issues that they were dealing with. She was the most enthusiastic member in participating in all the group activities; be it dance, fashion shows, music related activities and so on.

This gave her daughters a sense of comfort as they felt that she was engaged regularly, kept herself busy in her group and was also a source of inspiration for others in the group.

Towards the end of her life, when she had to be admitted into the ICU, every group member was available for her and was there as a support. She departed this world as a happy and satisfied person. The credit for which goes to the elderly group she was an integral part of and more importantly to the zest and enthusiasm for life that she had.

Her house is now being used for elderly care. Clinics have been set up and the space is very effectively being used for something that she believed in as a vital part of her life.

Case 3: 80-year-old housewife and Case 4: 84-year-old professional (A Couple)

This husband-and-wife team was very attached to each other and shared an ideal relationship. Their Children were abroad and would visit, but not very frequently. They would feel lonely, as the children were not there with them. As a result, they started looking at other avenues and became part of the elderly group and started participating in their weekly activities. This gave something to look forward to on a weekly basis.

As a couple, they started interacting with other group members and couples and could overcome the loneliness that

they would often feel. They even participated in short vacations outside town and enjoyed these in every way possible.

An interesting outcome of the group interactions was that both of them were able to express their love for singing for which they had never received any opportunities or encouragement earlier; especially the wife. She became the lead singer of the group and was able to realize her dream of singing. Her long-hidden talent got wings and she was able to use her music as her expression.

This engagement not only enhanced their connect with each other, but also helped them build other relationships with likeminded people.

Case studies like these highlight the relevance of various theories focusing on late adulthood as discussed above. Through group interactions, positive reinforcement, opportunities and constant encouragement and support the

elderly can move towards self actualization as given by Maslow. Maslow defined self-actualization as accomplishing the complete use of ones skills, interests and talents. It is the desire to do everything that one is proficient of doing become everything that one has imagined to become. It is the sense of individualistic achievement.

The perceived or imagined health of the elderly is very subjective in nature. It can very easily be affected or enhanced through social comparison. When the elderly sees or interact with others who are involved in social interactions, have busy life schedules both at a personal and a voluntarily level in society it can actually be equated with positive peer pressure. This influence can create a desire to redesign and remodel ones life. Social support and active involvement with the society can delay the aging process by providing a sense of belonging and a desire to give back to society.

The case profiles presented above show a clear indication of successful aging.

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