

# An introduction to the psychology of older people

Psychological factors may influence and explain some aspects of older people's functioning status. Therefore, knowledge and understanding of these factors may help to improve care and management of older people. This article is an introduction to the psychology of ageing.

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An active life and good health in old age is associated with psychological well-being. Often observed changes in behaviour are the result of physical health status. Furthermore, illness has profound influences on behaviour, and sometimes change in behaviour appears to be related to the development of disease.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, there is a strong relation between the psychological and physical aspects of ageing.

The psychology of ageing is defined as the study of the patterns of change in behaviour over the adult years of life. It explains how behaviour becomes organised or disorganised, and refers to the behavioural capacity of the individual to adapt to changes in their environment.<sup>2</sup>

The psychologist Erik Erikson outlined eight psychosocial stages of human development. For older people, the key stage was "integrity versus despair". Erikson suggested that psychological well-being in late life depends on previous success at negotiating preceding stages; alternative lifestyles are labelled as failure. If the previous stages of development were completed properly, an older person will experience "integrity" (ie, looking back at life with content, happiness and feeling of fulfilment). But if the stages have not developed properly, the older person will experience despair. Erikson also suggested that older people struggle to come to terms with the limits of their existence, achievements, and loss of a future.<sup>3</sup>

Changes in demographic trends, social expectations, work patterns, and improvements in health care have meant that Erikson's rigid distinctions between age groups have eroded. Additionally, older people in the 21st century are more willing to experiment with different lifestyles

than previous generations (eg, going travelling after retirement etc.). Therefore, older people will have different experiences of ageing depending on their individual circumstances. However, they will all experience significant changes and probably have certain age-related concerns in common.

## Experience of ageing

Another psychologist, Alice Heim, surveyed 180 of her contacts, who were all aged between 60 and 95 years of age, to ask them about their experience of ageing.<sup>4</sup> Based on the 160 replies, she concluded that:

- Physical confidence tends to decrease with age, whereas mental and social confidence tends to increase. Older people are aware that people make allowances for advanced age and they can use "ageism" to their advantage
- People become more stoic as they age – they are more accepting of unpleasant experiences. They also do not experience as much joy from pleasant experiences as they did in previous years. However, they are more appreciative of good experiences because they do not take them for granted
- Some older people become more tolerant of views different from their own but others become more rigid about their beliefs. Those who are able to learn from experience come to understand that it is more beneficial to behave tolerantly towards others even if they feel irritable
- Older people can also have opposing views about the value of their advice, with some being surprised when it is sought and others believing that their advice should always be sought

- Those who believe in the afterlife are less afraid of death than those who do not have such a belief, but they do feel some guilt about their lives (eg, mistakes they could have avoided). Some non-believers did, however, see death as some sort of rest; others viewed it as a way of avoiding pain or senility.

Although Heim's survey is useful as an insight into the experience of ageing, its sample was not a random selection of older people – the respondents were probably intelligent and of high socioeconomic status. Therefore, the views expressed may not be that representative given that educational, social, and economic factors affect the experience of ageing.

Older people experience significant changes, for example retirement, loss of a spouse, or diagnosis of serious illness. Also, they may have difficulties in adapting to living with chronic illness. Hopson presented a model of how mood changes during the transition from middle age to old age.<sup>5</sup> He described the stages of immobilisation (shock), despair, self doubt, then accepting the reality and letting go, which is eventually followed by learning new skills and behaviours to cope. Finally the person reaches the "integrity" stage described by Erikson.

Clearly not everyone experiencing a transition will pass through all these stages. Some stages might be missed or the sequence might be different. Some will go back and forth between stages, and some might not be able to reach the final stage and will be unable adjust to being older. To maintain a meaningful and desirable way of life, people need to meet the challenge of the losses of old age. Therefore, to help people respond to changes of ageing, it is important to be aware of what they are potentially feeling.

In a UK survey<sup>6</sup> of people aged 65 or older, respondents were asked their views on statements about living longer and the ageing population and how, potentially, these factors could negatively affect their life. Respondents agreed, in order of perceived importance, that lack of income, the NHS not having enough resources to keep them (as older people) fit and well, people not giving them enough respect, needing part-time work, family obligations to the elderly (eg, feeling a burden), and lack of activities and entertainment were valid concerns. In other words, the main concerns were: financial, health issues, and social matters. Older people often fear loss of independence and loss of dignity.

The value of the questionnaire is limited because

it provided respondents with a list of potential fears. Obviously, older people may have fears or concerns that were not listed in the questionnaire. But, ultimately, the questionnaire does highlight some of the possible fears and concerns of older people.

### Older women

Older women have a different experience of ageing to older men and, as a result, have specific concerns. The author C Rich, who campaigns against ageism towards women, wrote about how society breeds ignorance about ageing and death, with the older women carrying "the burden of that stigma" with what Rich called "unrecognised, unrecorded courage." She added she herself saw ageing as "failing" and that it was a "painful series of losses, an inevitable confrontation with the human condition".<sup>7</sup>

Women are much more likely to outlive their (male) spouses than are men. Thus for men, the experience of old age will probably be as part of a couple, but women are more likely to grow old alone. In the US, in 2002, 74% of men who were aged 55 years or older were married and living with their spouse compared with 50% of women in that age group. Also, 31% of women in that age group were widowed compared with just 9% of men. Substantially fewer men than women were living alone, just 2.3% of houses were occupied by a man aged 65 years or older living alone versus 7% of houses occupied by a woman in the same age group living alone.<sup>8,9</sup>

Similar figures are encountered in Europe. In the UK, in 2007, 20% of men aged 65–74 were living alone, compared with 30% of women in the same age group. Of those aged 75 and over, the proportions were 34% and 61% for men and women respectively.<sup>10</sup> In other words, women are more likely to experience loss and isolation. Older women are also more likely to experience poverty than men. They may have a low income, are probably living alone, and may feel insecure. Some fear going out alone, which increases their need for help.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, some try hard to maintain their identity, self-respect, independence and interests. More often than not there are challenges against the acceptance of services and the expectations of kin. Sometimes the challenges are less visible. Some older women feel vulnerable, their physical and mental function deteriorates with time, and they struggle to keep pace with new developments and information technology.<sup>11</sup>

## Ethnic minorities

Race and ethnicity will probably exert some influence on the ageing experience of individuals. Some people from ethnic minorities will have worked in poorly paid jobs, will receive a low pension, and may be dependent on benefits. As a result, they may be dependent on their children and relatives. Some are not fluent in English, and may have religious and cultural differences that affect conceptions of ill health and the relevant response. Potentially, a lifetime of social disadvantage and racial discrimination could have impacts on physical and psychological health.

Another point to consider is that although some South Asian and Caribbean cultures place high value on caring for their older people, some older people from these cultures may feel insecure and may be worried that their children will develop "Western" uncaring individualistic attitudes towards older people.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth remembering that knowledge of the psychosocial background of the particularly vulnerable groups amongst the older population will help in better understanding their needs and planning the appropriate programmes and services tailored to their requirements.

## Positive view of ageing

On the positive side, later life is seen as freer and less demanding, leaving room for self-realisation. Furthermore, "Awareness of the age-related limitations leads to an active reconstruction of self".<sup>6</sup> Many older people resume new activities which, although probably simpler than the activities enjoyed in younger life, can still bring pleasure into life.

Older people do not experience ageing as uniformly negative. The advent of anti-ageing products and procedures have had a marked effect on the psychological well being of old people. Their expectations have become higher – they expect to have a more active life in old age than previous generations had. Also, there is a gradual shift in the perception of the ageing body. Many older people no longer accept alignments or conditions, such as pain, as simply being a process of ageing. They want treatment for these conditions.

As Evans and Williams state, we should not forget that older people "are the survivors from their birth cohort, selected for their greater resistance to whatever mortal challenges their generation had to face".<sup>13</sup> Most will learn to try to compensate for age-related losses and will be able to function effectively in their activities of daily living.

## Conclusion

There is a strong relation between the psychological and physical aspects of ageing. The main concerns of older people are financial, health issues and social matters. They also fear loss of independence and loss of dignity. Older women and ethnic minorities have specific experience of ageing, fears and concerns. But many older people resume new activities, and they do not experience ageing as uniformly negative. Thus, it is important to know how older people feel to help them to better respond to the changes of ageing.

**Conflict of interest: none declared**

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