

Aging and the Elderly

Age is – the chronological passing of time

Aging is –a physical change over time

Elderly is – the perception of advanced age in people perceived by:

- Society as:
 - The end of a useful working life
 - Stereotype of frail and sickly persons
- The self as:
 - Accepting society stereotype
 - A progression to a life unburdened by paid work

Aging is a biological/physiological process that has postulated many theories on the cause that reflects the specialties in medical and biological sciences like:

- Programmed –
 - Genes turn on and off
 - Immune system to decline over time
 - Endocrine – hormones control the pace of aging
 - Inflammation – repair and replacement processes are capable of maintaining the balance in favour of the functioning molecules
 - Plus many others
- 1. No single theory adequately explains the aging process.
- 2. The process of aging is not uniform across populations being influenced by sociological and environmental factors.
 - a. Negative effects accelerating the aging process include:
 - Poverty
 - i. Poor housing
 - ii. Pollution
 - iii. Poor nutrition (osteoporosis)
 - iv. Poor health (reducing physical abilities)
 - b. Positive effects slowing the aging process is enjoyed by:
 - i. Parts of the population that do not suffer the deprivations
 - ii. Good nutrition
 - iii. Live in more affluent areas

The traditional approach to aging tends to be passive, fatalistic and rather downbeat.

- Research has shown that negative beliefs, thoughts, ideas and attitudes about ageing can have a detrimental impact on our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing as we age.
- This negativity about ageing is evident in the stereotypes about older people, which are prevalent in society.
- These attitudes can become internalised as we age and can generate rather defeatist, de-motivating and self limiting ideas about ourselves and our journey through later life.
- This can undermine our health and wellbeing as we get older.

The new positive approach is very different.

- Positive ageing is for those who want to do ageing differently.

- It understands that the 'mind' can have a significant impact on our physical and emotional wellbeing and positive ageing therefore focuses on the emotional and psychological aspects of ageing.

To prevent the negative outcomes, the positive ageing approach proposes three principal strategies.

- Develop a more balanced understanding of the reality of ageing which recognises the positive aspects of ageing as well as the more challenging ones.
- Adopt a positive attitude to gain a degree of control over negative mental states.
- Consciously build our emotional wellbeing and inner resilience so that we are better able to negotiate the significant challenges in later life

A positive ageing approach is underpinned by the presuppositions:-

- It is not what happens to us in later life, but how we respond, which will determine our wellbeing as we age.
 - External conditions and life events are obviously influential, but the choices we make on how to interpret and react to events in our lives is what makes the difference to our experience.
- It is important to develop and maintain a positive and optimistic mind-set which rejects self-limiting beliefs based on what is considered 'age appropriate' or 'normal' for some of our age.
 - Such age related limitations should be challenged.
- Age denial
 - The attempt to resist or cover up our ageing process is a form of rejection of our future selves and needs to be challenged.
 - We should be proud of whatever age we are and not succumb to age denial through anti-ageing potions or flattery about 'not looking our age'.
 - We are the age we are, and we look the age we look, at the age we are.
- Acceptance of getting older,
 - Including our mortality is key to our wellbeing and happiness.
- Equanimity about this part of life's journey
 - Is more beneficial than resistance and despair.

Elderly

Elderly was defined by the UK - Friendly Societies Act 1875

- Friendly societies paid de facto old-age pensions in the form of sickness benefit and the Act defined "old age" as 50 and above.
- A court ruling claimed that "natural decay" was not "sickness".
- However, the majority of friendly societies did not accept this ruling as they were in competition with each other and so therefore wanted to continue paying pensions to attract new members.

WHO Definition

- Age classification varied between countries and over time,
- Reflecting:

- The social class differences or functional ability related to the workforce.
- The current political and economic situation.
- Many times the definition is linked to **the retirement age**:
 - Which in some instances, was lower for women than men.
 - This transition in livelihood became the basis for the definition of old age, which occurred between the ages of 45 and 55 years for women and between the ages of 55 and 75 years for men.

The UN

Has no definition as it cannot be applied to the majority of countries especially in African countries where retirement is not part of the social framework.

Future of an Ageing Population

Is the title of a report by “Professor Sarah Harper and Sir Mark Walport”

Makes the usual recommendation for provision of suitable housing and other support (under the current situation not a likely policy priority).

More interesting is the recognition that:

- The elderly are not a homogenous group and all in need of help and caring for.
- They contribute to the caring of grandchildren and other family members especially older parents.
- Form a large part of the voluntary sector.
- An increasing number are in paid employment both part and fulltime.
- They engage in educational and other social activities (USA).

The report reflects some other developed countries realisation that many of the elderly, as defined by reaching the end of the working age, remain fit and able to work.

Elderly people are increasingly seen as human capital with pre-extinct skills or that they should be provided with opportunities to adapt to new technologies and training so that their contribution, as part of the work force, is extended.

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