

The Psychology of Aging

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What is Aging?

Aging is one of the most normal and regular processes that affect humans both positively and negatively. Along with physiological and physical changes aging brings out many psychological changes in individuals. Although aging takes place throughout life, the primary importance of aging is felt during the transition from middle to old age, and this could be considered as the most important stage of aging.

Processes that explain aging in humans

According to WHO, the world's greying population has been growing steadily with the decrease of fertility rates and longer life expectancy. Considering that aging is part of everyone's life, it is important to understand the psychological changes that can occur during different stages of life when age becomes more than just a number.

Age could be considered as largely psychological in that some people who have a negative attitude towards life may tend to feel older even before they reach their 40s, whereas others consider themselves old only when they reach 60 and beyond. Individuals feel age as a measure of health and physical manifestations such as graying of hair, wrinkles of skin or weakness of muscles.

Since most of us identify ourselves with our body, aging of the body naturally brings about aging of the mind. Moreover, with declining physical strength there may be a decline of psychological strength. Poor psychological health in turn affects the physical well being of an individual. Although life expectancy of individuals have gone up considerably in the last few years suggesting an improvement in global

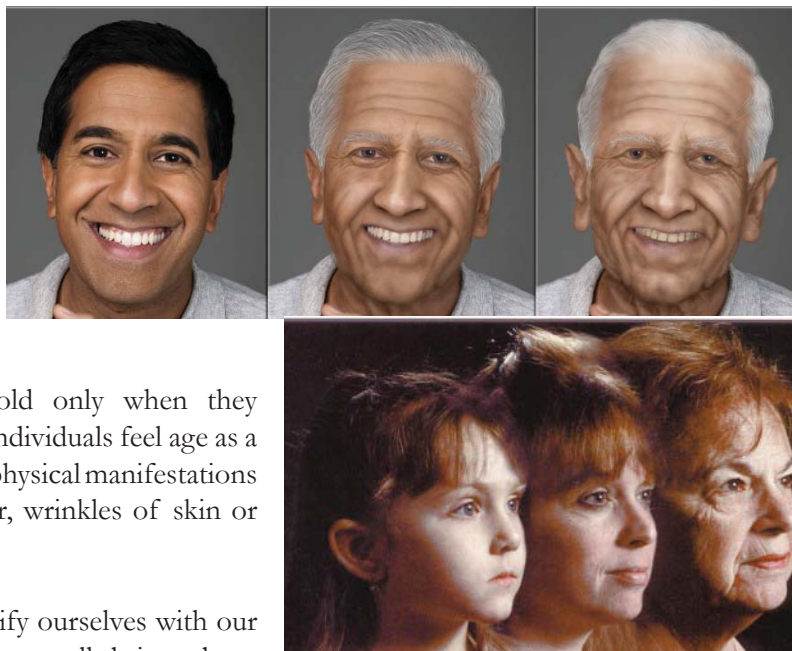
health, individuals still tend to remain apprehensive about the changes in life that age will ultimately bring about.

In psychology, Erik Erikson delineated certain stages of psychosocial development as applicable to adulthood or middle age as well as old age. As the individual continues to grow throughout life, psychosocially, the focus may be on generativity versus stagnation during middle age when individuals tend to contribute to their careers and family. People who choose generativity would be successful in using their skills at work or family or both. With stagnation they can feel unproductive and unrelated with the world. The last stage of Erikson's psychosocial development that occurs in old age brings out the dimension of integrity versus despair in which individuals look back at their achievements and accomplishments and may develop a sense of pride and integrity or may develop feelings of despair.

According to Erikson, old age is a period of self-reflection and will generally bring in a feeling of hopelessness or satisfaction.

However, some scholars consider middle age as primarily based on materialistic or worldly needs, and old age primarily based on spiritual and existential needs. Whereas middle age is about

'living' and living properly with individuals focusing on increasing assets, properties and savings for the future and also focusing on achievements. Old age is about 'surviving' with the primary concern about health, illness and death related issues. In certain cases thoughts of



dying can become very prominent in certain individuals, and they may want to hold on to life through family or creative work, which remains even after a person's death.

Aging cannot be considered strictly a chronological process but rather a psychological process where there is a negative rather than a positive force that justifies a person's existence. Even a child goes through the process of aging and grows up to an adult, but since the child is stepping into the world and expanding horizons the process of aging for a child is positive, while the primary aging phenomenon is through 'knowing' as a child grows up to know and contribute as an adult. Developing an identity becomes the primary motivation for life, and with young adulthood, individuals quickly switch on to the 'achieving' mode as young adulthood is all about using the knowledge gained to achieve money, fame or even enlightenment

for that matter. The 'living' stage comes next in middle adulthood as I have discussed, and at this time not only the fruits of achievements begin to reveal but the future is also secured with financial and emotional security provided by laying

the foundations of family and professional life in the earlier stage. All these stages of knowing, achieving and living are positive phases although all these stages may have specific dilemmas, yet the final stage of surviving is primarily motivated by a fear of death, and this negative force brings about the real process of aging. Thus it is easily understood why aging is primarily a psychological process. The fear of death reinforced in old age brings out a negative force in life, and if this negative force is somehow overturned or made positive, the process of aging will no longer be seen as something negative or detrimental.



The major psychological myths/misconceptions about aging

1. Getting old is a dead end - that there is no growth or potential for being actively engaged. Aging is not all loss and decline inevitably leading to sadness/depression. It does happen to some, but not to all. Most seniors are very much engaged.
2. Decline in mental function. This is the most frightening myth for most people. Fear of loss of independence in this way (or because of physical ailment) is at the root of all our myths and misconceptions about aging.
3. Old people are abandoned by their families. Not the norm at all. Most seniors have frequent contact with their children, siblings and friends.

Why do these myths/misconceptions arise?

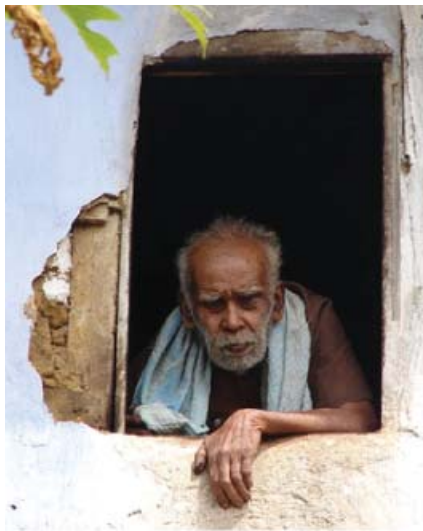
- They arise because we know of someone to whom such things have happened. As is human nature, we then tend to focus on that negative aspect. We tell ourselves, "That's what it's like to be old" when we see someone who has had a stroke, suffers from dementia, is in a wheelchair, etc.
- We have a tendency to lump all seniors into one demographic group. But the term senior can cover a span of 40 or 50 years. We would not dream of generalizing about the period of birth through age 50, so we should not do the same with seniors. They are a very diverse group. In fact, as people grow older, they get more different from each other due to individual milestones; being widowed or other changing family circumstances, personality is more entrenched, etc. There is no common denominator among a given group of seniors other than age.
- There is the myth of mental decline. We forget things even when we are younger. When we are younger however, we accept/dismiss it as just having too much on our mind at a given time. But when we're old and forget things, we automatically blame age.

- "Environmental/societal" factors contribute to the myths as well, like a crosswalk where even a very able-bodied person has trouble crossing before the light changes. The senior that holds up traffic trying to cross does not have a problem - the light just changes too fast for anybody. Things like too-small print on packaging, dim lighting in public areas, and grey-on-grey elevator buttons all set seniors up to "fail."

Why do we treat getting old as a problem as opposed to a natural part of life?

Society responds to situations or intervenes only when there are problems - when someone is in need. Therefore, if an individual is in need of some type of assistance and he/ she is old, then aging is seen as the problem that has caused you to be in need. In other words, if you have a "need" for public intervention, then you must have "a problem."

Of course, it is important to understand how the process of aging could be turned into something positive. The vast amount of literature, articles, TV programs, radio shows and newspaper columns highlight the process of aging as something largely physiological and something that has to be accepted, at best in a positive way or hidden (e.g. dying ones hair, smoothing ones wrinkles). It is as if aging is something negative but will have to be looked at positively. I would suggest that the process of aging being primarily psychological as explained by the fear of death, it is only caused by a negative force, but it is not inherently negative and can become a positive process. I am not suggesting cosmetic surgery or turning back time in terms of body image, but moving beyond body image and developing a 'soul identity' that could actually completely overturn the process of aging significantly. Identifying oneself with



the soul as sages do, and developing a spiritual potential within could go a long way in actually preventing psychological, and in turn the physiological aspects of aging. During ancient times, people led deeply spiritual lives and lived longer and looked younger than we do. Soul searching helps in overcoming fear of death, and if old age is seen as a step towards one's ultimate spiritual completion and the right time to explore other creative dimensions of life that have been ignored earlier, old age can become the most fruitful and the most positive phase in one's existence.

Is there "ageism" in our society?

- Yes, and it is incredibly insidious. It is rooted (like all "isms") in devaluing the aging population – they are past their prime.
- You can see ageism in action in things like unemployment rates among seniors and resource allocation (i.e. cutbacks to long-term care facilities, etc.).
- Abusing the aged - abandoning older people on roadside

Cognitive factors associated with aging

Memory

A lot of what is called memory "loss" is really just a slowing down of the ability to retrieve material. When individuals age their memory is still there, but they are not as quick at accessing it as it used to be. Due to aging verbal fluency may slow down (e.g. individuals may find it a difficult task to find names). However, there is some debate over whether it is harder for older people to solve new tasks. With aging people gain a lot of accumulated knowledge, skill and understanding, and may find it a difficult task to remember all of them.

What can be done to help keep our memory in top condition?

Memory "Toning" - Reading, doing crossword puzzles, and other such activities are good to keep the mind "vigorous."

Culture and psychology of aging

How do different cultures differ in their views on aging?

- North American culture places a very high premium on youth. In *Fountain of Age* Betty Friedan noted a Harris Poll that reported only 8 percent of Americans over 65 finding the term "old" being an acceptable label for describing themselves. A majority also objected to the use of terms such as "older American," "golden-ager," "old-timer," "aged person," even "middle-aged person." Barely half accepted the terms "senior citizen," "mature American," or "retired person" for themselves. Friedan noted how some senior citizen clubs fine their members if they use the word "old."
- 1. The "serious illness" is clinical depression. Approx. 2-5% of those over 65 is affected (not dissimilar to the general population). In nursing homes or hospitals, that population can be affected up to 25%.
- 2. Individual depressive symptoms are much more common. 15-20% of healthy seniors can have one or two symptoms, but that does not qualify them for clinical depression.

Previously unaffected seniors can develop "late onset" depression. A person could have been totally fine until a very advanced age, and then become depressed. Often when this happens there is an underlying medical cause.

Strokes

The most common cause of psychological problems among older people is the disability caused by strokes. Most strokes are blood clots that get stuck in the small blood vessels (capillaries) in the brain that supply neurons

with oxygen and other necessities. When this happens, many neurons die for lack of oxygen. If this happens often enough, the person may develop what is called multi-infarct dementia. They may become confused and disoriented; some may take to wandering off and getting lost; some may have difficulty forming new memories; many develop emotional problems such as anxiety and depression.

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease, a disorder of pivotal importance to older adults, strikes 8 to 15 percent of people over the age of 65 (Ritchie & Kildea, 1995). Alzheimer's disease is one of the most feared mental disorders because of its gradual, yet relentless attack on memory. Memory loss, however, is not the only impairment. Symptoms extend to other cognitive deficits in language, object recognition, and executive functioning.

- Throughout Asia, a large proportion of older people live with their children, but as financial and health status improves, this pattern is less common as it used to be. However, comparatively it can be said that Asian culture is very reverential and respectful of seniors. They are valued for their knowledge and experience.



- Psychology of Aging - Sri Lankan Profile - Sri Lanka is aging. It is assumed that one out of every four individuals would be above the age of 60. Elders in Sri Lanka are still respected and traditional family care practice is kept even during present times to a large extent, though in danger of it fast disappearing. Despite the limited access to elder care services in Sri Lanka, most of the elders are able to live with their families at home due to Buddhist traditions (e.g. respect elders, care of parents, concept of sharing, donation etc.)

Psychological problems associated with aging

Depression

How common is depression among seniors?
It depends on how you define depression. There are two types:

Behavioral symptoms—such as psychosis, agitation, depression, and wandering—are common and impose tremendous strain on caregivers. Diagnosis is challenging because of the lack of biological markers, insidious onset, and need to exclude other causes of dementia. The diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease not only requires the presence of memory impairment but also another cognitive deficit, such as language disturbance or disturbance in executive functioning. The diagnosis also calls for impairments in social and occupational functioning that represent a significant functional decline (DSM-IV).

What is the best thing about aging?

- The majority of seniors report that they are happy despite health problems that may be present. People adjust their goals and adapt to circumstances as they age.
- Things take on different priorities - things that may have caused you stress 20-30-40 years ago may not be as important to you. Seniors' accumulated wisdom allows them to accept that there are things you just can not change.

What is the most important ingredient for healthy aging?

- Attitude!! Having meaning and purpose in life (and it does not matter what it is that gives your life meaning - it could be stamp-collecting – it is not a value judgment).
- The only thing that separates people like Rick Hansen or Terry Fox from the rest of us is their attitude towards life. If you have a good, positive attitude, it can more than compensate for a number of other things that may be lacking.



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Warning Signs

When to Begin to Limit Your Driving

What are the warning signs when someone should begin to limit driving or stop altogether? You need not experience them all!

- You feel less comfortable and more nervous or fearful while driving
- You sometimes have difficulty staying in the lane of travel
- You experience more frequent "close calls" (that is, almost crashing)
- You've noticed an increase in dents and scrapes on your car or on fences, mailboxes, garage doors, curbs and so forth
- You occasionally have trouble judging gaps in traffic at intersections and on highway entrance/exit ramps
- Other drivers honk at you more often; likewise, you have an increase in instances when you are angry at other drivers
- Friends or relatives don't seem to want to ride with you
- You get lost more often
- You notice a slight difficulty seeing the sides of the road when looking straight ahead (that is, cars or people seem to come "out of nowhere" more frequently)
- You have a bit of trouble, sometimes, paying attention to signals, road signs and pavement markings
- You realise you have a slower response to unexpected situations; once in a while, you experience trouble moving your foot from the gas to the brake pedal or find you've confused the two pedals.
- You are easily distracted or find it hard to concentrate while driving
- It has become more difficult to turn around to check over your shoulder while backing up or changing lanes
- If you're truthful, you would have to acknowledge that medical conditions or medications may be affecting your ability to handle the car safely
- You have received more traffic tickets or "warnings" by traffic or law enforcement officers in the best year or two than you have received in the past

Source: Internet