

Social and Psychological Problems of the Elderly:Solutions and Perspectives

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Abstract:

Issues and needs of the elderly receive attention worldwide, and scientific studies in the field of elderly care have emphasized that old age is a developmental stage that requires the formulation of plans aimed at benefiting from the efforts and experiences of the elderly and providing the most effective care methods that guarantee them a dignified and stable life by integrating them into society.

This research paper aims to diagnose the reality of the elderly and identify the most important problems they face, in order to formulate an optimal approach to dealing with this group by specialists, caregivers, and society as a whole. To achieve the study's objectives, a descriptive analytical approach was adopted as the most suitable method for serving our topic.

The study concluded that the principle of proper care for this sensitive category with its specific needs and requirements can only be achieved through the concerted efforts of everyone to provide warm and friendly social relationships based on our social and ethical values.

Keywords: Psychological problems, needs, retirement crisis, aging.

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1. Introduction

Old age is considered one of the natural stages in the cycle of life, affecting the lives of individuals or organisms. However, systematic scientific research on aging, its aspects, and its effects hardly dates back further than the second half of this century. Therefore, practitioners in the field of gerontology have not definitively determined the causes of aging. Researcher Anna Aslan (1982) suggests that aging is a developmental process linked to genetics and the environment, although its exact causes have not yet been accurately identified.

However, aging is not merely a purely biological process manifested in the physical and physiological changes that occur when an individual reaches advanced age. It is also a social

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phenomenon reflected in society's attitude towards individuals when they reach a certain age arbitrarily defined by society, without considering individuals' physical or mental condition. This societal attitude imposes certain restrictions, notably retirement from their jobs and activities, leading to the cessation of many daily activities they have been accustomed to for years and preventing their participation in them. Retirement implies withdrawal from community life.

If modern societies have neglected the roles of the elderly in work and production at some point, rural and simple communities still assign social roles to the elderly that suit their status. Small communities often turn to them to resolve their issues and seek their advice. Recently, many developed societies have recognized the importance of caring for the elderly and have established numerous specialized centers. The field is now open to researchers in various scientific disciplines to study this age group in the hope of providing them with a better life. We cannot ignore the contributions made by this large number of elderly individuals, who constitute a special group living in a sensitive stage. Here, personal and familial readiness plays a crucial role in caring for them. They should be provided with special care and attention tailored to their characteristics, requirements, and problems. This is what we will attempt to address through this simple presentation, shedding light on the importance of addressing the psychology of aging and the sensitivity and importance of this group in preserving societal order and balance (Zahran, 1994 , p. 47).

Believing in the existence of an optimistic outlook towards these elderly individuals, we understand that the elderly have the ability to live a happy and meaningful life despite the pressures of aging and its burdens, along with the accompanying organic diseases. However, if their illness is diagnosed and appropriate treatment is provided, satisfactory results can be achieved (Al-Zarad, 2003).

The elderly stage is one of the fundamental stages of development, accompanied by numerous physiological, biological, social, and psychological changes. These changes lead to the emergence of many problems that hinder the elderly's harmony with their family and society in general, affecting their mental and social well-being.

The elderly are an undeniable demographic in our contemporary society, where aging has become a noticeable presence. This is due to the increasing proportion of adults aged sixty or older compared to the total population. Sillamy defines this stage as "a stage following the maturity stage characterized by a decline in all bodily processes. It immediately follows the maturity stage and is marked by a significant decline at all levels, especially the physical level, where factors of decay prevail over construction (Almberge, Rafstrom, & Winblad, 1997)."

2. Dimensions and Aspects Discussed in the Concept of Aging

Here, we will discuss the main dimensions and aspects that have been addressed in the concept of aging as follows:

2.1 Biological Aging

Medical studies indicate that biological aging is a common pattern of physical decline in structure and function that occurs with advancing age in living organisms after reaching maturity. These degenerative changes accompanying aging extend to all physiological, organic, motor, circulatory, digestive, reproductive, glandular, nervous, and cognitive systems (Ali, 2012, p. 20). Aging is thus a natural vital process and not a disease, influenced by lifestyle, environmental factors, and genetics. However, early care in maintaining health to prevent diseases in general, and age-related diseases in particular, leads to enjoying a fulfilling life and healthy aging. Delaying the aging process is crucial both physically and psychologically.

2.2 Social Aging

Social aging is viewed as a developmental stage of life characterized by a decline in a specific social role. This means that changes extend beyond the individual's physical body and organs in terms of structure and function, and also affect the individual's behavior, attitudes, and social relationships.

2.3 Psychological Aging

It is a condition of mental decline leading to weakening of memory and attention, accompanied by significant mental fatigue. This condition involves a lack of interest in current events and a focus only on past memories that are tinged with positive aspects, which the elderly recall to gain secondary benefits.

2,4 Temporal Aging

According to this perspective, temporal aging refers to the age stage extending from sixty or seventy-five years old until the end of life. This period can be divided into two stages:

- 1) The first stage, known as early aging or early seniority, spans from (60-75) years old.
- 2) The second stage, known as late aging or senescence, spans from (75 years old until the end of life).

There are several classifications of the elderly, including:

- Young-old, aged between 60-74 years old;
- Middle-old, aged between 75-84 years old;
- Oldest-old, aged 84 years old and above.

Understanding the characteristics of the aging stage helps us (Almberge, Rafstrom, & Winblad, 1997, p. 761):

- Understand how to interact with the elderly population.
- Identify their care needs.

- Develop preventive and therapeutic programs tailored to the needs of the elderly.

3. Characteristics of Aging

Here is an overview of the most prominent changes that occur in the late stage of life for the elderly:

3.1 Biological and Physiological Characteristics

The individual's growth reaches its peak during youth, then declines with aging, with variations among individuals due to personal differences.

- Changes in body weight, hair loss, dry skin, trembling hands, blue spots under the skin, height loss, increased ear and nose hair, and swelling of the feet.
- Decline in visual acuity (vision difficulties) and hearing impairment.
- Loss of appetite and complaints of digestive disturbances.
- Reduced resistance to diseases and environmental fluctuations.
- Metabolic changes: The rate of metabolism, the process of building and breaking down in the body, decreases to 38 calories per hour for adults and drops to 35 at the age of seventy.
- Changes in the activity of endocrine glands, with a noticeable decrease in hormone secretion as people age.
- Changes in lung capacity, with reduced air volume during inhalation and exhalation in the elderly.
- Digestive system changes, including a significant decrease in saliva secretion, reduced digestive capacity, intestinal malabsorption, impaired bowel function, and changes in liver and kidney function.
- Changes in the nervous system, including noticeable deterioration in nerve responses due to aging of nerve cells and the central nervous system, with a decrease in the number of nerve cells as people age.
- Changes in muscle strength and motor performance, with muscle atrophy and reduced flexibility due to physiological changes in cells, affecting motor aspects such as muscle strength, contraction speed, and extension.

3.2 Mental Characteristics

Studies indicate that the most deteriorating mental abilities in the elderly are reasoning skills, with a significant decline in numerical, verbal, and cognitive abilities. This explains the cognitive impairments that occur with aging, as the elderly face difficulties in problem-solving, reasoning,

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and exhibit mental rigidity, reduced ability to learn new skills, difficulty organizing information, and deterioration in attention, cognition, and psychomotor performance.

3.3 Emotional Characteristics

The physical weakness, chronic illnesses, and mental function decline experienced by the elderly make them prone to fear, anxiety, and tension, as well as bouts of depression, which may result from retirement, leaving work, the absence of a life partner, and the children's departure from the family due to marriage.

Increased self-sensitivity, where the elderly may redirect their interests and concerns towards themselves, assuming roles such as the loving, critical, or indifferent.

Attachment to the past, where the elderly feel a deficit in their present and compensate by dwelling on past events.

3.4 Social Characteristics

A vital aspect of an individual's psychological well-being is the establishment of successful social relationships. However, with advancing age, elderly individuals often experience a significant reduction in their social interactions, limiting them mostly to their old friends who live nearby, leading to feelings of boredom and monotony.

3.5 Psychological Characteristics

The emotions of the elderly tend to be self-centered, revolving more around themselves than others, leading to a peculiar pattern of selfish behavior (Abdel-Moaty, 2005 , p. 368). Among the psychological characteristics distinguishing the elderly are:

- Feelings of isolation and estrangement, where individuals perceive a psychological barrier separating them from others.
- Feeling like a burden on others, especially when elderly individuals reach an advanced age and struggle to manage their affairs.
- Increased attachment and fondness for their children, with the intensity of this attachment growing as individuals age, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between attachment to children and age.

4. Problems of the Elderly Stage

The elderly stage is considered less than ideal for the elderly, as it involves the loss of youth and vitality, and the emergence of weakness and frailty, leading to inevitable problems such as feelings of boredom, loneliness, emptiness, psychological and mental disorders, and severe depression, which sometimes drive the elderly to contemplate suicide. Additionally, their deteriorating health and social conditions, retirement from work, and deterioration of social relationships all affect their lifestyle, characterized by negativity, rigidity, and an inability to adjust goals, hindering

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their psychological and social harmony with themselves, their families, and the society they live in. A range of problems faced by the elderly can be presented:

4.1 Health Problems

These are related to the characteristics associated with aging, and include health and physical deterioration, such as decreased activity and mobility, heart and artery diseases, high blood pressure, diabetes, hearing and vision impairment, anemia, and weakened immunity, which can lead to susceptibility to infections and malignant diseases. Immune system dysfunction can also lead to attacks on various body organs, resembling attacks on foreign bodies, affecting joints (rheumatism), bronchi (asthma), or skin (eczema).

4.2 Psychological Problems

Life plays a significant role in shaping an individual's personality, and no two individuals share the same experience, making the aging process more challenging for some than others. Barrow suggests that some psychological conditions seemingly resulting from aging processes may be found upon close examination to be merely associated with aging. He also points out that the elderly often suffer from emotional problems of psychological origin, termed functional disorders, such as anxiety disorders (fears and phobias), personality disorders like avoidant disorder, and emotional disorders (depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder). Suicide should not be overlooked when discussing psychological problems, as a significant proportion of suicides occur among the elderly. Moreover, many of these cases are not detected, as they appear to be the result of drug abuse. Not all of these cases are due to mental illness; sometimes they result from psychological disorders. Many researchers view the elderly with optimism, believing that they are capable of continuing their activities if provided with opportunities for a healthy and sound mental life.

Psychological problems also include a sense of finality, as the fear of sudden death creates various existential, religious, and time-related fears for the elderly, who may fear not having enough time for repentance.

4.3 Social Problems

Most of the problems experienced by the elderly result from inevitable changes they face in society. Successful aging depends on maintaining a suitable level of adaptation in social roles and maintaining good relationships with their community upon reaching old age. Factors contributing to longevity include strong family ties, continued engagement in daily activities, and good economic status. It is natural for individuals to play active roles in society, helping to maintain their status as valuable members. However, this is not the case for the elderly (Ali, 2012, p. 46). Social adaptation to the loss of a life partner is an important and active element in their social lives. Social problems that also prevail in the elderly stage include:

4.3.1 Retirement Problem

Retirement is an isolating event in elderly life. Some studies suggest that aging is synonymous with retirement. Retirement marks the transition from being a productive individual to being a non-working individual, typically occurring at sixty years old, known as retirement with a pension for those in formal employment. This transition impacts their lifestyles to varying degrees. The most significant problems related to adapting to job loss result in negative psychological, economic, social, and educational aspects for the elderly, negatively affecting their psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Some scholars refer to this issue as a retirement crisis.

4.3.2 Family Problem

Adapting to the loss of a life partner is an important element in the family life of the elderly. Traditionally, women marry men of similar age or older. As men's average lifespan is shorter than women's, widowhood becomes more common among females in old age. Additionally, family dynamics change with children's marriage and departure from the parental home, leaving the elderly either living alone, feeling empty and lonely, or living with one of their children. Living with children may bring about another problem—friction with their children's spouses and feelings of submission and dependency after being in a position of authority and dominance. This may lead to family disintegration and lack of affection between the elderly and their children. Alternatively, they may have to reside in elderly care homes, depriving them of social life and family warmth, leading to the emergence of psychological disorders such as anxiety, social isolation, etc. Many studies have addressed the social and family aspects of the elderly, examining the causes and effects, whether positive or negative, especially in terms of housing, income, relationships with children and friends, isolation, lack of support, routine lifestyle, and other issues studied in research on the elderly.

4.4 Cognitive Problems

It is known that aging is accompanied by a decline and deterioration in cognitive abilities in general, leading to changes in the speed and accuracy of memory, as well as in learning, thinking, recall, and retrieval processes. Additionally, cognitive abilities such as perception, recognition, and overall intelligence flexibility decline in older adults. The decline in cognitive abilities in aging is attributed to the aging and physiological deterioration of the nervous system, leading to atrophy in brain cells. This decline can also be attributed to poor brain nourishment with new educational experiences, lack of training in proper thinking methods, or impaired hearing and lack of alertness and slow response. This may cause insufficient oxygen to reach the brain due to heart conditions or due to some side effects of certain medications. One of the most common

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disorders is Alzheimer's disease, which can destroy 70% of brain nerve cells and lead to continuous deterioration and inevitable death. Cognitive disorders also experienced by the elderly include fear. There are also cognitive effects of anxiety and depression on individuals. There is a prevailing belief that an individual's emotional state affects their cognitive ability, and depressed older adults often complain of problems with memory, attention, concentration, and available memory capacity for task performance. Anxiety activates two competing types of processes: anxiety weakens memory performance by preemptively stopping some of the available space in working memory, and task demands cause an increase in the type of performance, arousal level, task difficulty, which affects their social interaction and overall adaptation within the community (Ali, 2012, p. 27). Although theoretically, these problems experienced by this group of elderly individuals can be separated, in reality, they are interconnected and intertwined, collectively forming a crisis in aging.

4. Psychological and Social Care Measures

There is no doubt that caring for the elderly is a shared responsibility among members of society. Human beings in old age are often in a state of weakness and vulnerability. Moreover, caring for the elderly is a manifestation of social integration in Islam, Allah the Almighty has said: **"Your Lord has decreed: Do not worship any but Him; Be good to your parents; and should both or any one of them attain old age with you, do not say to them even "fie" neither chide them, but speak to them with respect, (17:24) and be humble and tender to them and say: "Lord, show mercy to them as they nurtured me when I was small."** (Quran, Surah Al-Isra, 17:23-24).

This care is realized by following several things (Ali, 2012, p. 46):

- The elderly should have a role that fills their lives, giving them a sense of worth and the feeling that others need them. The elderly should not spend the remaining years of their lives after retirement in bedridden idleness, which hinders physical and mental activity. Instead, they should live actively, optimistically, and should spend their old age engaging in various activities as much as possible.
- Allowing them to express their opinions.
- Allowing them to participate in recreational, sports, and social family or national activities. These activities have a positive impact on the lives of the elderly by changing their daily routine and avoiding boredom. The movement required by such activities helps maintain the vitality of the elderly. Additionally, they provide opportunities to meet others, exchange ideas, and share memories.

Practically, mental health aims to prevent psychological disorders first, treat psychological disorders, and maintain better health and adaptation. In the first aspect, efforts are made to identify aspects that may cause disorders and work to remove them, while providing general

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conditions that empower individuals to cope with difficult situations. In the second aspect, specialized institutions support individuals by treating their psychological problems, accompanying them to ensure their successful return to a healthy state, and ensuring their adjustment to different life conditions. This drives mental health workers to care for the individual and the environments they are closely attached to. Regarding the elderly, aging is associated with gradual organ consumption and biological changes that accompany aging. It is natural for muscle deterioration to occur as a stage in the life cycle, as stated in the Quran: **"It is Allah Who created you in a state of weakness; then after weakness He gave you strength, then after strength He made you weak and old. He creates what He pleases.He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful."** (Quran, Surah Ar-Rum, 30:54).

The mental health services for the elderly need proper psychological, professional, and social guidance to prevent anticipated problems before they occur or to treat existing problems that the elderly may face, based on an understanding of the psychological characteristics of the elderly.

5. Conclusion

We have decided that the conclusion of the research will consist of a set of recommendations directed primarily towards researchers and scholars interested in this category, and towards those responsible for caregiving on the other hand. The principle of proper care for this sensitive group, with its specificity and requirements, can only be achieved through the concerted efforts and by changing the negative perception that has gradually spread in our society, undermining its values and principles, namely the demeaning view of the elderly. Our recommendations are as follows:

- Providing warm and friendly social relationships when an elderly person faces any problem in various aspects of life.
- Not leaving the elderly to live in solitude and isolation, as this means depriving them of one of the most important aspects of life, which is living within a community that can help them open new channels of communication within the family structure or between the family and the external community, and reinforcing some desired old connections.
- Working as much as possible to prevent the elderly from becoming disabled through regular check-ups, correcting poor dietary habits, and using vitamin and mineral supplements as therapeutic and preventive medicines under the supervision of a doctor.
- Encouraging them to engage in walking, sports, swimming, and other activities that their health condition allows, and quitting smoking.
- Helping the elderly to maintain love and emotional relationships between them and continuously strengthening marital relationships by building marital understanding instead of engaging in unproductive discussions and arguments.

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- Children should respect and appreciate the actions of their parents and make them feel loved and valued, acknowledging that they still need their presence.
- Meeting the emotional needs of the elderly.
- Providing opportunities for the elderly to form and strengthen social relationships.
- Creating opportunities for assuming responsibility and leadership that they may have felt lost after reaching old age.
- Allowing the elderly to express their feelings freely and occupy their leisure time in a useful way.
- Enjoying recreational services and activities collectively, such as social activities including trips, entertainment games, visits, artistic activities such as drawing, music, needlework, as well as cultural activities such as seminars, lectures, and attending poetry and literary evenings. The community service behind these cares about increasing the social performance of the elderly, which is embodied in three levels:
 - ✓ Restoring the elderly's ability to social performance.
 - ✓ Protecting the elderly from social performance obstacles.
 - ✓ Assisting the elderly in developing their capacities to improve their social performance.

Finally, we believe in the right of every elderly person to enjoy life after old age, based on the social and moral values that compel us to reciprocate the kindness of those who taught us and raised us, those who sacrificed their health, wealth, and contributions for the continuation of life and the advancement of society.

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