

Being happy in old age: reasons, methods and challenges

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Abstract

Happiness is an important component of subjective well-being and people generally wish to be happy. There are various factors linked to happiness, e.g. health, family relationships, social support, financial situation, work, personal independence, generosity and so on. It is quite possible that old age is associated with many positive and negative factors in the way of experiencing happiness. As there are many benefits of happiness it is important that this area is explored and individuals are supported in their pursuit of finding and maintaining happiness.

Key words

Aged, Happiness, Health, Mental Health, Method

Introduction

Happiness is one of many pursued objectives of life. It is a complex concept with great variation in its meaning for individuals. Usually described as a state or feeling, it is influenced by a lot of factors such as health, relationship, finances, individual values and so on; however the ability to experience happiness may have genetic and biological underpinnings.

There are lot of benefits being happy, in any age. Besides the psychological and social gains associated with happiness there are a lot of health related benefits as well. But with many age related issues of elderly, including multiple morbidities can one be really happy? It is important to discuss and reflect on this rather not well traversed area.

In older adults, poor health significantly predicts life dissatisfaction;¹ which may affect quality of life, and happiness. However, in spite of illness one can be happy. Considering physical and mental health, there are lots of benefits why one should try to be happy. Happier people are comparatively healthier than unhappy individuals. For example, it has been observed that happiness decreases the risk of coronary heart disease (CHD). Greater the number of positive emotions experienced, lesser is the risk of heart diseases; which suggests that positive emotions can be protective against the CHD.² Similarly, research suggests that happy people are less likely to have

long-term health conditions such as chronic pain, vision problems, frailty, and stroke.

There are reports about the association of happiness with longevity. Most of the studies suggest that happiness increases longevity. It is true for general population and even for patients.³ This may be due to the observation that happier people are more resilient to illnesses.⁴ Although most studies involve middle-aged and older people, happiness has been observed to be a protective factor for all-cause mortality in very old.⁵ However there are studies which suggest happiness may not be associated with mortality.⁶ Poor health itself may cause unhappiness and decrease life-span; there are reports of people who are unhappy having higher probability of dying.⁶ Multiple confounding factors and interrelated issues make the relationship between happiness and longevity rather indistinct.

It is obvious that people who are more satisfied with life are happier. In this connection, the factor that is closely linked to unhappiness is stress. Besides stressful life events and situations, worries and regrets affect life and become an obstacle towards the experience of happiness. Dealing with stresses, worries and regrets effectively is an important point in the path towards happiness. Interestingly happiness can be a buffer against stress, and decrease the impact of stress on the body and mind. Happiness can even decrease the pain intensity and suffering.

Methods to be happy

So it does make sense to try to be happy. It is important to find ways and methods for happiness, depending upon individual choices and preferences. However few common findings can be discussed. Happiness is mostly influenced by factors such as family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom and personal values.⁷ These should be explored and strengthened in the areas suitable for the person. There are many suggestions and options. For example the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK provides some tips to be happy; it suggests to manage stress levels, use humour and enjoy, boost self-esteem, have a healthy lifestyle, talk and share, and to build resilience.⁸ Connecting with the people, being physically active, learning new skills, being kind, giving to others, helping or volunteering, and mindfulness i.e. being aware

of the present moment, one's own thoughts, feelings and people around are also suggested as ways for mental well-being.⁹

Other points that may help are: having positive emotions,¹⁰ being generous,¹¹ having a purpose in life, being physically active,¹² managing illnesses, improving social connectedness,¹³ spirituality and meditation.^{14,15} Simple measures such as sharing a meal or eating together can make one happy as well.¹³ Remaining connected with people and increased socialization not only deals with the ill effects of loneliness and isolation but also helps gaining positive health and happiness in the process.

Interestingly, there are now interventions being suggested to improve happiness.¹⁶ In addition, for many interventions for illnesses, happiness is being considered as an outcome measure. It appears that the field has greater clinical potential. Although there are many suggestions available, it is essential to find one's own way. The methods cannot be prescribed; it is individual specific and one has to reflect what makes him or her happy.

Challenges for happiness in old age

Health issues are common in old age; and many have multimorbidity.¹⁷ However patients with severe illnesses can still be happy, as health is only one of many factors linked to happiness. Taking measures to prevent illness and disabilities, and taking care of illnesses and getting treated adequately are essential. Many times older adults and their carers accept symptoms and signs as just old age related and do not take or delay taking adequate steps to deal with these.

Besides physical illnesses, many older adults suffer from mental illnesses especially depression;¹⁸ and a proportion have various disabilities. Psychiatric disorders are major contributors of unhappiness. Identifying and treating depression and other disorders are definitive strategies to defeat unhappiness.

Financial worries are one of the major concerns in old age. Although money cannot buy happiness, lack of it influences life in many ways. The cost of treatment and care can be worrying; so also if the children are still financially dependent on the older parents. Increase in income and living standard in many Western countries has not resulted in increase in happiness level;¹⁹ so just having lot more money may not help.

Bereavements of the contemporaries and other life events are rather more common in old age. Anticipating, preparing oneself for these stresses with appropriate coping strategies and accepting the inevitable could be helpful. Children are a great source of happiness in all ages; however this may not be true for many older adults. There are many concerns; for example children's poor emotional health,¹⁹ relational problems, maltreatment, neglect and even abuse from children can be reasons of unhappiness in old age. These are reality for many older adults.²⁰

Perception of ageing may be a factor for the experience of happiness in old age. A negative self-perception of ageing has been linked to depression.²¹ It is essential to develop a gracefully accepting attitude towards ageing and be positive to the changes over the years.

Conclusion

Being happy has many advantages. Factors that are associated with happiness are largely known, although individual variations are possible. In the same way, the reasons of unhappiness and the challenges in old age are being understood more and this may lead to innovative approaches for interventions. It is essential to explore individual specific ways to support older adults to be happy; and there is a lot of potential for research in this area.

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