

Spring 2017

Perceptions of Successful Aging Among Maine Elders with Physical Limitations: Insights from Qualitative Interviews

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Recommended Citation

Minor, Madeline and Knight, Rebecca, "Perceptions of Successful Aging Among Maine Elders with Physical Limitations: Insights from Qualitative Interviews" (2017). *Thinking Matters Symposium*. 72. https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking_matters/72

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Introduction/Background

- There are currently 46 million people, age 65 and older, living in the United States (Administration on Aging, 2016). By year 2060, our population is expected to consist of roughly 98 million adults over the age of 65 (more than twice the current statistic). In addition to a growing population, elders are also living longer with the global number of centenarians projected to increase 10-fold between 2010 and 2050 (National Institute on Aging, 2011).
- With this impending influx of older adults living in our society, as well as changes in population age structure, how we care for our elders is of increasing concern. Due to the increase in older adults, aged 85 and older, the number of elders living with a disability is also predicted to increase. About 16 million adults over age 65 are living with a disability of some sort, most of whom are age 85 and older (He, 2014).
- With a substantial increase in the number of adults over the age of 65, increases in life expectancy, combined with medical advances, escalating health and social care costs, and higher expectations for older age, increasing efforts have been placed on understanding what constitutes healthy or 'successful aging' (Bowling, 2005). While successful aging is typically defined in terms of good physical health and avoidance of disease, this is often unrealistic for most older adults.
- Additionally, exclusively focusing on one's overall health and physical functioning fails to take into account the many other aspects of life that can define one's success (i.e. life satisfaction, social participation and functioning, and psychological resources, including personal growth or emotional, cognitive, and spiritual well-being).
- Through this study, the researchers aim to learn firsthand how living with a physical disability might impact the aging process. In doing so, they will conduct qualitative interviews with community dwelling older adults who are living with physical limitations, in order to obtain their individual perspectives on what constitutes successful aging along with their views on ways to enhance its likelihood. By focusing on individuals with physical limitations, the researchers intend to challenge the biomedical perspective of aging and further examine whether or not aging successfully really does require being physically active and in good health late in life, or instead requires greater internal resources or a combination of both.

Research Question

How do elders living with a disability perceive the aging process?

Methods

- The researchers identified an exploratory, qualitative study, based in grounded theory, to gain greater insight into the perceptions older adults living with a disability have regarding their aging process. Participants were asked how their physical limitations and the environment in which they live have impacted their aging process through 30 minute, semi-structured individual interviews.
- Six elders who regularly attend the Salvation Army Senior Center in Portland, Maine volunteered to participate in this study.
- Inclusion criteria included being age 65 or older, having a physical limitation of some sort, and not having a diagnosis of a cognitive impairment, such as dementia or an intellectual disability that may hinder data collection.
- Before conducting research, all materials and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Southern Maine to protect the welfare of the participants.
- A recruitment flyer was given to the agency to attract potential participants to the study. All members of the senior center who met the eligibility criteria and were interested in participating in the study approached the Activities Director. Among the nine members who showed interest, the researchers randomly selected six participants.
- Each interview was audio recorded on a password-protected device, and then transcribed into a Word document for Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA).

Quotes from Participants

Social Support

"it [coming to the senior center] has been good for me because I meet different people with different cultural backgrounds and personalities. I am able to cope with people, understanding where they may be coming from. We have one fellow here who is deaf and blind but knows sign language. I went over and I spoke to him. He was sitting at a corner table all by himself. I told him to come over with other people, using my hands and gestures. In any given situation there is always an opportunity to help a person who is going through mental or physical, conflicts or situations."

"The Salvation Army provides many services to those who are disadvantaged and elderly. If you want help with your life, they will help on many levels. It's a very helpful organization for a lot of people."

"My family means a lot to me. They come to me for advice and we support each other. I am always there if they need me. They give me something to live for."

Religious Beliefs

"God has been good to me. All together, it [my life] wasn't all that lovely, but through it all success comes through faith and God and how we apply it. Things come alive, faith rises in your soul to know the reality of who God is."

"I go to church every Sunday... It's more of an involved church... The people there try to get me to talk more and take part in more of the events. I like to keep to myself sometimes, but it's nice to have the support."

Staying Active and Engaged

"I like to stay involved. I volunteer at Maine Medical Center, I've been there ten years. I also volunteer at the American Red Cross, I've been there about eight years. And I volunteer at Wayside Meal sites."

Self-Acceptance and Self-Determination

"I try to do a good job taking care of myself to the best of my ability...I'm my own worst critic, but I know deep down in my heart that I've done a better job than most."

"I live day by day, stay positive, and make what I want of myself."

Challenges of Living with a Disability while Aging

"I have trouble with people's attitudes not just towards aging, because you could cover aging up with dye and stuff like that, but the attitude they have towards aging and the disability you have."

Suggestions on Aging Well

"Get out, go to the mall, walk, go for a swim, join a club. Everyone just sits around in my building, that's all they do. They don't do anything. Get out of the house, be alive! Come to the senior center."

"Live life to the fullest and don't be afraid of change."

Results

- Findings demonstrate that aging with a disability is a complex phenomenon that requires a combination of self-acceptance, self-determination, staying active and engaged, and having a support system in order to age well. It is believed that through self-reflection and having a spiritual awareness, self-acceptance can be achieved, ultimately leading to greater life satisfaction. Additionally, support systems such as attending a senior center, are a beneficial way for elders to engage in the community and stay connected with others.

Results Con't

- There are many challenges associated with aging with a disability. Society's perceptions of elders along with those who are disabled can have a profound impact on one's self-efficacy. The lack of public accessibility and transportation for those who are disabled as well as access to affordable healthcare is also disadvantageous for this population. From a program and policy perspective, more funding should be directed toward understanding and supporting those who live with late-life disability.
- Despite these challenges, analysis elicited approaches to assist elders who are living with a disability. These include staying actively involved, getting the most out of life, embracing change, staying determined regardless of one's disability, maintaining a sense of humor, as well as positive self affirmation. Moving forward, professionals who work with this population should encourage elders to consider these approaches as a way to promote both physical and psychological health.

Discussion

Social Work Application

- From a policy perspective, the major implication is that more funding should be directed toward understanding and supporting those who live with disability. It is vital for professionals to be up to date on policies, funding, and ways to make healthcare more accessible.

- Professionals can cast strategies that help elders with disability to cope positive adaptations. It is imperative to focus on attributes other than the physical aspect of aging, such as, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy and self-esteem, and sense of control over one's life. By focusing on these aspects, it may bring awareness that aging with a disability may be a positive transformation.

- It is essential for professionals to develop relationship and networking skills in order to better assist older adults with disability in recognizing their potential, strengths, and resources available. In return, those with disabilities can have a more positive outlook and feel as though they have aged successfully.

Limitations

- Our limited sample size did not adequately allow for comparisons across categories of age, gender, and race.

- Participants were selected at random, but there may have been factors that contributed to selection bias. Participants who attended the senior center for several months, formed strong relationships with other members as well as the activities director, may have felt more comfortable stepping forward to participate in this study, as opposed to those who were newer to the center and had not formed those connections.

- Due to the brief time-frame in which the researchers had to collect and analyze data, saturation was unable to be fully achieved.

- Additionally, there was no objective way of screening out whether or not participants have a history of mental or cognitive limitations, which may have had an impact on the results.

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