Applied Positive Psychology

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Week 5

Lecture 17: Successful Aging: Part 2

I welcome you all to module 5 of this course, and today we will be continuing with lecture 15. This will be part 2 of the last lecture, which is Successful Aging Part 1. So before we talk about today's lecture, let me give you a brief recap of what we discussed in part 1 of this lecture. So in part 1 of this lecture, we talked about the meaning of successful aging. What is the meaning of successful aging? How successful aging is defined. And in that context, we have discussed certain models of successful aging and how successful aging is addressed in different models in terms of conceptualizing it. And at the end, we discussed some of the very significant or classic studies on successful aging and the different factors identified by those studies. So these are a few things that we discussed in the first part of this lecture.

In today's lecture, we will continue from there, and we will understand some of the other concepts related to aging or successful aging. So today we will be talking about the concept of the paradox of aging and happiness, and how happiness is connected to aging. We will also discuss the process of successful aging. In terms of successful aging, what are the factors that influence successful aging? In terms of processes, at the end, we will discuss future directions in successful aging. What should we do in terms of future research and future endeavors?

So let us start today's lecture. So today we will start with the concept of the paradox of aging. So, the paradox of aging is basically a concept that discusses how, as people age, generally in developed countries, they report more happiness, which seems paradoxical

because with age, a lot of decline occurs—physical decline, cognitive decline—but people generally report higher happiness as they age in most of these developed countries, at least according to the data. So this is considered a kind of paradox of aging. So a paradox in aging research is that while older adults generally experience poorer physical health, they also report higher happiness levels compared to younger adults. So that is considered a paradox because, with the physical and psychological decline in functioning, people's subjective experiences of life should also deteriorate; however, this generally does not happen for a lot of this population. They experience a higher level of happiness compared to younger adults. So in a broad sense, this is called a paradox of aging. Now, contrary to stereotypes of older adults that suggest as people get older, they are lonely and unhappy. Studies show lower depression rates in older adults compared to younger adults and reduced negative effects compared to younger adults. So their negative emotions are also less experienced by older adults, with positive emotions remaining stable. So, these are some of the findings in line with the paradox of aging. Although much of this data comes from North America and Western Europe, global studies reveal some variations in this pattern.

 In specially high-income English-speaking countries, well-being follows a U-shaped curve, with happiness increasing slowly in late adulthood. So it starts with higher, then it goes down. So when we talk about U-shaped, basically, if you show data like this, keeping happiness here and age, slowly, with the passage of time, happiness decreases and reaches its lowest point in mid-age, and then it increases, something like this. So, you know, I think I have shown it here: happiness should be here, and age should be here. So after middle age, slowly, the happiness increases again. So this is a pattern they observe in most of these high-income, English-speaking Western countries. Whereas in regions like Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, well-being tends to decline or remain unaffected by age. So, in some other regions, they did not see such patterns very clearly. Now, why is this paradox of aging reported by a lot of these regions of the world, especially the high-income countries? Some of these factors can explain why this has happened, even though there is a physical decline and a psychological and functional decline, but people still report higher happiness and well-being indicators as they age. The number one reason could be reduced

day-to-day stress with age, as stress peaks in middle age and declines in older adults.

So why people report the lowest level of happiness in middle age? Middle age refers to ones 40s and 50s or maybe from 35 to 50 years of age, middle age is when the stress is highest in one's life. Because of so many responsibilities—family responsibilities and professional responsibilities—stress is at its peak level in middle age. So probably at that time, people reported less happiness. But this whole stress of middle age declines once people reach older adulthood as they cross 60 and so on. For instance, the study of 1.5 million Americans found that stress was highest around the age of 50 and decreases significantly in the 70s. This decrease may reflect a shift in how older adults perceive stress, as they may view events like minor disagreements as less distressing based on past experiences. People also grow and become more mature in experience, so the way they perceive stress, the events, and all these things actually decreases because of their maturity and so on. So that could be what some of the research show. So this could be one of the reasons that the stress of life overall generally decreases as people enter old age. The second reason why this paradox is observed is that older adults generally improve in emotion regulation, known as the emotional maturity hypothesis. And prioritize emotion regulation as a developmental goal. So research shows that older adults, as we progress in our lives from our learning experiences, are better able to regulate their emotions. We are better able to control our emotions. This happens as a result of one's life experiences. So emotional maturity increases. This is something very clear as people age. And because of that, people also prioritize emotion regulation as a developmental goal. So people are able to regulate their emotions. So, the effect of negative emotions and so on is that they are able to regulate them much more. So their impact is much lesser. For example, older adults show a greater ability to reframe negative events to reduce emotional impact and to find positive aspects in challenging situations. So people in old age are better able to reframe things and look at positive dimensions because of their maturity. So that also enhances the quality of their emotional lives.

Evidence suggests this enhanced regulation helps maintain a high positive emotions effect and low negative emotion. As observed in a study of tracking moods in individuals aged

18 to 94, one of the studies where they tracked the moods of people in this age group showed that older adults exhibited more mood stability compared to the younger ones. Thus, older adults' perception and management of stress may explain why they report greater well-being in their old age. Because they are wiser and more mature, they are better able to handle their emotions. So that could be another reason why people report more happiness and well-being in old age.

Now, one particular theory that very specifically deals with this aspect of the paradox of aging and can explain it very clearly, apart from these factors, is called socio-emotional selectivity theory. In short, it is also called SST. Now this SST, or socio-emotional selectivity theory, proposed by Laura Carstensen, suggests that as people age, their perception of time influences their social goals and emotional priorities. Because as people age, their perception of time is an important factor that shifts their priorities in life. So older adults, recognizing that time is limited, realize that as people reach old age, the time left in their lives is very short. So, time perception changes. So what do they do? They prioritize emotionally meaningful relationships and experiences over acquiring new knowledge and expanding social circles. So their priorities in life change because they perceive their lifetime is very limited. So now they cannot, generally they don't waste their time on unnecessary things. They prioritize things that are emotionally more important. Like they will give more focus to emotionally meaningful relationships with people who are close to them. They will spend more time with them because that is what enriches their lives rather than focusing too much on other things. Because they feel that their time is limited. So they prioritize only things that are emotionally fulfilling. One could focus on close relationships.

They seek deeper connections, positive interactions, and emotional satisfaction rather than novelty and exploration, which are part of young age and so on. Those things are less important; they give less priority to this matter. They focus on deeper connections with people, positive interactions, emotional satisfaction, and whatever gives them joy; they focus on those things. So, because of this limited time perception, their whole priorities in life change, and they only focus on emotionally fulfilling experiences, which makes them happier. Now, what is the implication of this model on older adults? Some of these things

I have already mentioned.

One thing, because of this factor, is that it enhances the emotional well-being of older adults. So, older individuals tend to focus on positive emotions and meaningful relationships, which help them. experience greater life satisfaction and happiness in their lives. Second is selective social interaction; because of this aspect, they prefer spending time with close family and friends rather than maintaining a large social network and engaging in unnecessary things. They will focus on people who really matter to them, and they will derive emotional satisfaction from that.

The third important thing is that, you know, by prioritizing emotionally fulfilling experiences, they develop better resilience to age-related challenges like physical decline or social losses as they cope with aging changes. So because of this prioritization, they are better able to handle the declines that happen, whether physical decline, social losses, or psychological decline, and so on. They are better able to cope with it. So this could be another theory that directly addresses why this paradox of aging occurs. Now let us look into some of the process models of successful aging.

All the other models that we talked about in the last lecture, or the studies that we discussed, are only identifying factors that are responsible for successful aging. Now let us look into some of these models or some of the processes that are involved in successful aging. How do people maintain that or adapt to losses related to aging? What is the process involved? So we'll look into some of these models that focus on processes rather than just identifying factors. So research on successful aging has evolved from identifying just characteristics, which we discussed in some of the classic studies in the first part of the lecture, that predict who ages successfully, to exploring the processes by which successful aging happens. What is the process involved? So we'll be focusing on the processes here.

So this shift reflects a broader interest in understanding how people adapt to aging and maintain well-being throughout their lifespans. How do people maintain it? What is the process involved? Let us look into this aspect. Some prominent process models have

emerged in recent studies. We'll discuss a few of them. Processes discussed in these models will have applied implications for intervention and strategies for successful aging.

So these processes will be very helpful in terms of actually applying this understanding to strategies for successful aging or interventions for successful aging. One such model is called the Selection Optimization Compensation Model. In short, it is called the SOC model. The Selection Optimization Compensation Model was introduced by Baltes and Baltes in 1990 and was expanded later. So, this model emphasizes a lifespan development perspective, focusing on behavioral and psychological processes that help individuals adapt to age-related losses.

So this model focuses on how people adapt to losses associated with aging as they age. So that is the process aspect of it. So the SOC model addresses how older adults experience balance losses, such as declines in cognitive processing, speed, neural efficiency, and sensory equity, as well as gains like social status, wisdom, and family respect. So how do people address those losses and certain gains in life? So, this model says there are three strategies. that people use to maintain and enhance their functioning in later life.

These three processes or strategies mentioned in the name of the model are selection, optimization, and compensation. So let's see what these three are. Selection basically means it involves narrowing the focus to activities of high personnel value. As we have already discussed in the socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST model), people change their priorities as they age from a lot of these peripheral things to only emotionally valuable things. So, this model also says that as people age, they narrow their focus on highly valuable personal things.

This selection can be elective based on choices or loss-based. Sometimes what they select and what they give importance to can be decided by certain losses in life, such as those necessitated by physical and functional limitations. For example, someone might opt to reduce athletic participation to focus on professional and personal relationships if faced with a chronic condition. Might forgo sports altogether. So let us say someone is involved

in sports and other activities, but due to a certain chronic condition as they age, they may not be able to continue such athletic or physical activities; then they will just choose to reduce those activities because of the limitations and focus on other things.

Other valuable activities of personal value, like personal relationships or professional relationships, are important at that time. So they will narrow down their selection process based on what is more adaptive and valuable in their lives. So that is called a selection part. Second is optimization. Here individuals invest in improving skills and capabilities for chosen activities.

So once somebody chooses something, they will also optimize whatever choice they made in their life. So they will invest in improving skills and capabilities for whatever they choose to do in later life. For example, a grandparent might take a course on smartphone usage to better connect with their grandchildren and so on. As time passes, they may find newer things as they age, and the new generation may have different capabilities and skills in terms of technology and so on. Because they prioritize their connection with close family members, they will probably enhance their skills in technology-related things to better connect with their grandchildren, for example, and so on.

So they will optimize their skills because they give importance to close relationships, and so on. So in order to optimize that, they will enhance skills according to that in order to maintain their well-being. The third factor is called compensation. This strategy uses aids and alternative methods to maintain involvement in valued activities.

Now, whatever valued activities one chooses in the later stages of life, people can also use alternative methods to maintain involvement in those valued choices. For example, an individual with a visual impairment might switch to audiobooks or large-print books to continue enjoying reading. Let's say somebody prioritizes reading or whatever else they enjoy reading. And because of certain declines associated with old age, there may be visual impairments, making it difficult to read books due to visual problems and so on. They can compensate for that thing because they value reading.

Now they are not able to read because of physical decline of their eye capacity. So they may compensate for that by shifting to audiobooks or large print books; whatever it is, they do so to compensate because they consider reading an important activity that provides them with a lot of well-being and emotional well-being, and so on. To compensate for losses, they will use alternative things like audiobooks and so on. To maintain their well-being. So many studies actually support the role of this SOC model in successful aging.

So people who use these strategies are actually more likely to experience well-being in later age. For example, greater use of SOC strategies, such as selection, optimization, and compensation strategies, research shows, is linked with more positive emotions, satisfaction with aging, and reduced loneliness in older age. A lot of the studies show that these strategies are very effective. SoC strategies can also help older adults manage life challenges such as buffering the impact of financial difficulties on life satisfaction, and so on. In the different domains, these strategies were found to be very helpful for older people.

SoC strategies were particularly beneficial for older adults, as seen in occupational studies where SoC strategies aid older workers- 49 plus in maintaining competency benefits that are not observed among younger workers, so people who are in the older age group, if they use those strategies, have been found to improve various functioning aspects, maintain competency, and enhance emotional well-being as well. SOC strategies enhance daily emotional well-being in middle-aged and older adults, but this effect is not seen in younger adults. So this strategy was found to be more significant in older adults and middle-aged people compared to younger adults. So this aligns with SOC theory, which posits that adaptive strategies become more crucial in the face of age-related challenges.

So, these strategies become more significant with certain age-related losses and declines. So research shows that these strategies can be utilized by people, and those who successfully age probably use these strategies. Another model that talks about the process of successful aging is called the proactivity model of successful aging. This model focuses on how individuals can manage the increased challenges of aging through forward-thinking

and adaptive coping strategies. So as people age, so many challenges increase in their lives in terms of functioning, decline in functioning, and diseases, and so on.

So one can get into successful aging by managing all these challenges and addressing the increasing challenges that come with aging. How can they manage? By forward-thinking and adaptive coping strategies. The people who are engaged in forward thinking mean they're able to predict certain things in the future, and accordingly, they start doing things beforehand and use many adaptive coping strategies that help them enter into the successful aging category. Unlike passive aging, when people simply age and enter old age, they do not actively do anything to achieve successful aging. So, in the case of passive aging, where people just respond to life's difficulties, when some difficulty arises, they just respond to it.

The proactive activity model emphasizes anticipating potential future risks and proactively taking steps to mitigate them. Because people can predict certain changes that are likely to happen as they age, they can focus on those possible changes that are going to happen and take steps beforehand. So that's called proactively taking steps to mitigate these problems before they actually happen. That could be very important in terms of entering successful aging.

So it's based on the understanding that aging comes with cumulative physical and social stressors and problems such as health issues, loss of social support, limitations of mobility, and so on. All these challenges are bound to arise as people age. And people understand that all this will accumulate as they age. So this model suggests that people can enhance their quality of life in the later part of their lives as they age by adopting two main proactive behaviors. So how can they mitigate the impact of these collective or cumulative problems with age is by taking some proactive behaviors.

So there can be two proactive behaviors. One is preventive adaptation. Another is a corrective adaptation. What are these two? The preventive adaptation aims to reduce the likelihood and severity of future challenges, so you take preventive steps before they

actually happen. You adapt beforehand; you take preventive and proactive steps before they actually happen so that you know you are able to deal with them much earlier in terms of being prepared for them. For instance, Older adults might engage in regular exercise, maintain a healthy diet, and quit smoking to prevent health deterioration. For example, we can all take a lot of preventive steps against health deterioration that may come with age. We all know about all these things, but are we taking proactive steps for them? So if somebody in their earlier years starts doing regular exercise, maintains a healthy diet, and so on, they will obviously have fewer health-related problems in old age because they are taking preventive steps or coping strategies. So this is an example of preventive adaptation, which can help enhance the quality of life in later ages. Second is corrective adaptation. On the other hand, here it involves responding to present difficulties, whatever has arisen, by making life adjustments that help individuals manage existing challenges.

Corrective means whatever has already happened because a lot of things you cannot predict. Certain diseases may occur even though you maintain a healthy lifestyle; still, something can come out of the blue. So corrective adaptation is for those things that come as a surprise, which you cannot predict, and so on. So make corrections in the present life situation to adjust to it.

So that is what it is about corrective adaptations. For example, someone managing a chronic illness, such as diabetes, might seek out resources. So corrective adaptation means that this has already happened; now, what do we do with that? So you can seek out resources such as social support or health information to help them navigate day-to-day life and improve their well-being. How can you minimize the impact of a chronic condition, such as diabetes, and so on? How can you minimize their impact and reduce their effect on your life so that your quality of life is much better? So in those conditions, you take all the necessary steps, like seeking out resources, help from others, health information, whatever it is, regular doctor's visits, and so on. You can make all these corrective adaptations to minimize the impact of some negative events and enhance the quality of life.

So that's called corrective adaptation. This model says we can enhance the quality of life

with age by using preventive adaptations as well as corrective adaptations. Now, many studies support this model. For example, in a longitudinal study of 357 adults aged 72 to 98, those practicing preventive behaviors such as exercising and quitting smoking reported a higher quality of life. In the later stages of life. Similarly, a study of over 3,000 individuals aged 50 to 70 found proactive coping to be linked to better physical health.

So those who are taking proactive coping strategies had much better physical health in the later stages of life. Another study with 2,971 participants aged 25 to 75 found that future-oriented planning was associated with increased life satisfaction. For reported by those participants. So together these findings suggest that planning ahead and engaging in proactive coping and preventive behavior contribute to improving physical and emotional well-being in adulthood. So, a lot of these studies actually support the concept of this particular proactive model.

Now, if you could just summarize what we have studied from different factors, from the first part of this lecture to this part. So, studies show the diverse factors that could contribute to successful aging. I just listed some here, like maintaining physical health, which is one important aspect; maintaining physical health through diet, exercise, and healthy habits proactively can be very helpful. Maintaining a strong social and spiritual connection, an active social life, and spiritual activities can also enhance the quality of life can also contribute to successful aging: having a sense of purpose, focusing on family, engaging in community activities, focusing on positive emotions and meaningful relationships, planning ahead, and engaging in proactive coping and preventive behaviors.

All these factors, and many more that we discussed, can contribute to successful aging. Some of the studies very clearly showed, in terms of psychological well-being, that maintaining a connection with close family members or people who are close to us, and maintaining an active social and spiritual life, can all contribute very strongly to successful aging as we age or as we enter the later stages of our life. So what is the future direction in successful aging in terms of what takeaway messages we should derive from all this understanding and focus on for future studies and understanding? So, as the global

population ages, society must explore new ways to support successful aging by fostering purpose, engagement, and well-being among older adults. So this is the main takeaway from all these studies: since this demographic of the population is shifting and a large number of people are actually entering old age, this number is increasing because of improvements in medical facilities and life expectancy, and so on.

As a society, we all should be prepared to support this population in entering successful aging so that they are not just surviving, but rather successfully entering the successful aging category, allowing them to be active contributors to their own lives, the people around them, and so on, so that they also feel a sense of purpose, engagement, and well-being in the later stages of life. So this is like a societal responsibility we all have. Research shows that a sense of purpose and active engagement in later life promote happiness and health.

This is like many of these models, as research indicated. Therefore, at the societal and community levels, it is essential to create opportunities for older adults to remain meaningfully engaged. Now, how can older adults remain engaged and have a meaningful and purposeful life in society? Obviously, they can do whatever they want to do, but the thing is, as a society, we can also give them opportunities. Because this is not just an individual thing; it is also a societal thing. So wherever they're living, they should also get the opportunity to get engaged and have an active life. Those facilities have to be there so that they also feel a sense of purpose and active engagement in later life.

So, as a society, we should ensure that this is available to them. Developing intergenerational connections can also play a key role in fostering meaningful relationships. Allowing older adults to form new relationships beyond family and close communities can enhance social integration and reduce isolation. So, this has come up again and again in all of these studies. So finding those opportunities for connection in the community setup is also very important.

Social integration will reduce isolation among this group and enhance the quality of their

lives. So, as a society, we should provide such opportunities for this population. We should also address the economic and healthcare disparities that affect aging. This is also very important, as this population is increasing. Whatever economic and health care disparities can influence this population, we should reduce those barriers.

Socioeconomic challenges such as limited access to health care, food insecurity, and housing instability accumulate over time and can severely impact the quality of aging. All these factors can deteriorate the quality of life, such as socioeconomic challenges, limited access to health care, housing problems, and so on. All of this can accumulate and collectively impact the quality of life. So we should be careful about those factors as well as just psychological factors. Health care providers can aid in early detection by assessing not only physical health but also the psychological, social, and financial well-being of older adults.

This comprehensive approach can help address their diverse needs. So people have diverse needs; not just psychological, but also financial, social, and all kinds of needs that have to be properly assessed, and they can be. This kind of comprehensive approach has to be taken to address the well-being of the older population. Furthermore, given the demographic shift that is happening, the younger generation should also consider their attitude towards aging and support policies. But there is sometimes a gap between the younger generation and the older generation due to a lack of connection and understanding, which may hinder many of these things because the younger generations are making policy decisions. So if we can reduce those barriers through these research findings and interconnections, the younger generation will probably support many of these policies and other things that are good for the older population which addresses the needs of this population.

So by proactively addressing these issues now, society can create a foundation for sustainable improvement that will support the aging population in the years to come. So these are all different factors; multiple factors; an comprehensive approach has to be taken and addressed slowly, so that we can build a foundation to address their issues, especially after a few decades when this population will be a much larger group. So the work has to start today itself so that the foundation can be built and supported when the population in

this particular group is very high. So these are some of the future implications that we need to be careful about, and these are all informed by the researchers. So with this, I will stop here. Thank you.