

**LIFE ADJUSTMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION OF THE ELDERLY
(GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION)**

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ABSTRACT: *Gerontological education has become imperative in our changing world. Elderly people require a form of education that enables them to cope with grief, loneliness, fear of death, declining health, life adjustment, mental health issues and other losses that are peculiar to old age. The rapid socio-economic changes especially the current roughening economic conditions, coupled with a growing emergence of the nuclear family structure have collectively attacked some established traditions. The growing urbanization has claimed many young people who prefer to live in urban areas even if they have no employable skill, they simply drift to urban centres and isolate the elderly people in the rural areas. The educated children must of course seek and obtain jobs and settle down and live in their working environments which are usually far from their elderly folks. The growing emergence of unclear families implies that a person's immediate responsibility is to take care of his/her immediate family (wife, children husband). The frequency of visits of sons and daughters to their old folks in rural areas to deliver material supplies have increasingly dwindled owing to hard economic realities, with attendant cutting down of areas of financial responsibility. Life has become so difficult. It is in the light of the above that this paper seeks to address the issue of life adjustment and mental health education of the elderly (gerontological education), advocate its introduction as well as recommend techniques needed for such education.*

KEY WORDS: life adjustment mental health, education, elderly, gerontological education

INTRODUCTION

Life has a myriad of challenges, and adjustment is needed in all aspect of human endeavors. Hence counseling is needed, as it offers the necessary assistance and help to individuals need to overcome these difficult situations. A well adjusted individual is not one who never face or succumbs to

challenges but one who deals effectively and efficiently with such challenges. Counselling therefore becomes a positive encouraging, energizing, and organizing profession. The counselor has a better platform to plan and be successful in life, irrespective of the challenges. The challenges may be in the area of vocational, educational, personal-social or psychological adjustment. As a trained and experienced counselor, he provides information for the counselee who uses such information to overcome his challenges and assisting him to make informed decisions.

Olaiyinka (1993) sees counseling as a relationship characterized by mutual respect effective communication genuine and complete acceptance of the client by the counsellor and concentration on the needs problems and feelings of the clients. Counseling therefore is a learning orientated process which stresses more rational planning, problem solving, decision making, intentionality prevention of several adjustment problems and support for situational pressures arising in the everyday lives of normal people.

Concept of Adjustment

Adjustment is the individual's ability to deal success fully or unsuccessfully with life problems or the way environment fashions out events for individuals to adopt and cope with. A person who is capable of dealing successful with life problems, is well adjusted. If he lacks the potentialities for problem solving and submits to them he is maladjusted. According to Ibudeh (1989), the concept of adjustment refers to active, creative effort to live effectively. Egwim (1995), defines social and psychological adjustment as adjusting to social and psychological activities, interactions, conforming to norms and social expectations experiencing emotional stability, subjective happiness and contentment, relative freedom from handicapping anxiety, frustration tolerance and flexibility.

Concept of Mental Health

The problem of mental health is a global phenomenon and is an issue of concern all over the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productivity and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (Herrman, Saxena and Moodie 2013).

Mangal (2007) asserts that mental health is the state of one's peace of mind, happiness and harmony, brought out by one's level of adjustment with his self and hiss environment. Such a person is capable of successfully steering himself away from difficult situations involving stresses without losing his/her balance or breaking himself or herself.

Mental health refers to cognitive behavioural and emotional wellbeing, it is all about how people think, feel, and behave. People sometimes use the term “mental health” to mean the absence of a mental disorder.

Looking after mental health can preserve a person’s ability to enjoy life. This involves reaching a balance between life activities, responsibilities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience. A mentally healthy individual can be easily distinguished from others by his mode of living, behavior and personality characteristics. Mental health of a learner is very important for efficient learning and proper development of personality. There are different types of mental health problems, some of which are common, such as depression and anxiety disorders, and some not so common such as Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The world health organization acknowledges that nearly half the world’s population are affected by mental illness with an impact on their self-esteem, relationship and ability to function in everyday life.

Good mental health is required by individual’s success and achievement in life. Parents, teachers and students need to be familiar with mental health problems. This awareness enables one to develop preventive measures that can possibly handle mental health issues. Mental health signifies the health of the mind, and its functioning just as the physical health is concern with the health of one’s physical organs and their functioning. Mentally health of the learner is required in teaching and learning process, it is important for effective learning and proper development of personality. Mangel, 2007 Good mental health is therefore very important to students. Successful adjustment and achievement in school. Teachers counsellors ought to be familiar with mental health problems to enable them develop preventive measures of dealing with the issue.

Stress and mental health are like two sides of the same coin. Stress has a significant impact not only on the psychological well being of an individual, but also on one’s mental health. Stress is a normal phenomenon but it can have both positive and negative effects. It’s presence may imply danger and can therefore prepare individual’s to take defensive action. This defensive action is part of coping strategies.

When coping strategies are successful, they can lead to the state of good mental health. If stress is not managed properly, it can lead to serious problems. Therefore, exposure to chronic stress can contribute to both physical and mental illness, such as heart disease and anxiety disorders. This view is in tandem with what Auerbach and Gramling cited in Olowo and Abudullahi (2008:4).

It becomes imperative for the teachers and counselors to take seriously the issue of stress and mental health education of the elderly with a view of coming up with effective coping strategies that will successfully lead to the state of good mental health of the elderly.

Education of the Elderly (Gerontological Education)

Gerontological education refers to education of the elderly persons with an age range of from 75 years to senility (90 years and beyond). This idea may be new in Nigeria, in the United States of America and Europe, the concept of “Old People’s Home” Nursing Home or Family’s Home are terms that are usually used to depict the provision for elderly persons. Denga (1993) has asserted that gerontological education is primarily aimed at furnishing skills to, elderly persons in order to help them cope with those psychosomatic conditions that tend to disturb their normal life and consequently rush them to death. A number of factors are attributed to hinder their normal life. This include loneliness declining health, grief, nostalgia, fear of death, and a profound experiences of losses in life, are among the major components of gerontological education. Ageing has an impact of all aspects of human life including the social, economic, cultural and political domains. Understanding and providing for ageing is therefore an important issue for this century. The World Health Organization WHO (2002) has therefore proposed a model of active ageing based on optimizing opportunities for health participation and security in order to enhance quality of life for people as they age.

The Need for Gerontological Education

There is need for gerontological education. The elderly has gone through all the productive years and must be accorded some rights in terms of educational services that will enable him at least function or integrate into the society pending when death comes knocking. The elderly who have reached the zenith of their occupational careers and may have retired and are inactive must receive some form of education to keep them actively involved in some sort of vocational activity to reduce boredom, indolence and depression which may result from idleness. Elderly persons need to learn some occupational skills that will enable them to become self reliant to some extent and be useful to themselves, as total dependence on other people becomes stressful. Nowadays even those who have retired find it difficult to survive as their monthly stipends or benefits are not regularly payed. Retried adults need some educational and counseling modalities to cope with retirement demands and effects. Adjusting to one’s spending propensity may require lessons in post-retirement budgeting.

According to Denga (1993) Grief may be defined as a reaction to any kind of loss, some elderly persons have lost their spouse their home, their family some experience grief because of loss of

youthful energy and appearance, some experience grief because they have lost their opportunity to become a local political leader, while some exhibit nostalgia because of lost opportunities to establish a stable life style and raise a good family.

Some elderly persons have failed so woefully in their career life that they continue to be haunted by feelings of nostalgia. They can hardly look back on great achievements. Some elderly persons experience grief because of fear of death, they think they are close to death divorce sickness, visual loss, stroke, sorrowful reminiscence of life's up and downs, negative evaluation of their life dreams and societal expectations of what they should have achieved. These are all sources of grief for which gerontological education is needed.

Elderly persons experience stress in every facet of their life, stress is a silent killer, it is also a state of intense anxiety that is produced when events and responsibilities exceed one's coping abilities. Elderly person's who have had to contend with stress have witnessed how their bodies under stress can lead to illness. Iwasaki and Mannell (2000) have stated that stress is known to be a major contributor to coronary heart disease cancer, languidness, accidental injuries and suicide. Long term stress could lead to many unwanted conditions including depression, backache, hypertension, migraine headaches among others. Stress alone may not be negative but how people respond to stress is what determines its effect on their lives. Elderly persons learning to identify when they are under stress, and what is stressing them, and the different ways of coping with stress can greatly improve their mental and physical wellness. Elderly person's experience loneliness, isolation unkempt physical appearance and other health challenges which slow them down to the point of developing psychosomatic illness. They are faced with economic difficulties which affect them adversely. These elderly persons require some help to come out of their predicament. Gerontological education is a service as well as a form of education that can keep the elderly busily employed and active so that those who are still able bodied and talented may make a contribution to the National development in the evening of their existence Denga (1993).

Techniques of Gerontological Education

Groombridge (1982) has adduced reasons why education is beneficial to an aging population, to promote self reliance and independence to enable older people to cope more effectively, to boost their contribution to society, to encourage older persons to impart their experiences to each other, and to other generations and to enhance self actualization. In looking at the techniques, some may not suit all the categorizes to elderly education, while others will effectively apply to some elderly persons.

a. The development of skills in alternative a vocational activities that will ensure self-employment. Elderly person's need to be exposed to the curricular aspect to cover⁴ this form of education. A vocational activities like gardening, crafts farming around the house, teaching at the elementary level through story telling. They may also decide to keep a snailery. The local demand for snails is high, and this may be sold to house molds, restaurants or hotels.

b. The elderly must be taught the need for personal hygiene. The care for one's personal appearance, hygiene and clothing is important, as unkempt appearance adds to depression and psychological derangement. Elderly person's who observe hygienic rules and conditions are more likely to enjoy their lives than the untidy ones.

c. Elderly person's need to learn to engage in different kind of physical fitness and well being to reduce the incidence og hypertension and stress. Homer (1990) sees stress as one dreadful but invisible disease that should be eradicated, as it attacks everybody regardless of their status, colour and light. Various in house exercises should be taught the elderly who can then carry them out as regularly as their health may carry.

d. Elderly person's need to be regularly taught to enjoy leisure. Leisure time activities are referred to as recreation which is defined by Kackson (2006) as an act of experience selected, by a person during leisure to meet a personal want or desire primarily for his/her own satisfaction. It is concern with the recreative activity that will bring about a renewal of spirit and body activities that have the potential for enrichment of life through the development of the intellect. It involves watching television, attending an opera base jumping, taking evening stroll around the compound or to friendly people and places gardening and hastening to music.

Kraus (1996) agrees that the aim of leisure is to rest and rejuvenate, and rebuild the body from a breakdown situation. Leisure is a situation that provides for good health and long life.

e. Denga (1993) advocates the introduction of rational emotive education to help combat and possibly eliminate a feeling of helplessness or sense of futility illogical thinking by elderly persons may make them sick. For an elderly person to dread death and contemplate evading it is irrational. Again for an elderly person to think that he or she needed to achieve a lot in his/her life before being considered worthwhile is illogical. Such a rational education can eliminate feelings of nostalgia, futility and grief.

f. Elderly persons need to be taught about the importance of their medical and nutritional needs.

The elderly must be taught and given the necessary awareness and orientation, that with their advancing years, the body systems deteriorate progressively. The incidence of ill health will increase, hence there is need for the elderly to communicate promptly any sickness to their spouses, children, relatives and care givers. They must visit hospital, and present themselves for regular medical check up at least quarterly. They must also ensure that they patronize qualified medical

personnel and avoid quacks. The elderly must be taught to abstain from self-medication, take only drugs as recommended by certified medical doctors and shun the use of all hard drugs.

There is need for nutritional guidance for the elderly, they should eat balanced diet regularly, and meals that are not too solid but very easy to digest. They should neither over eat nor under eat. They should avoid fatty foods to prevent being overweight. They should eat fruits and vegetables that are in season, especially those that are rich in vitamin C and folie acid. The elderly must ensure that they take vitamins C, E and B6 regularly. These could help prevent constipation and help improve bowel movement (peristalsis) and digestion. The elderly should avoid diet that is high in fat and sodium and regularly drink plenty of water. The should avoid caffeine and carbonated beverages. The consumption of alcohol, beer and hot drinks may lead to constriction of blood levels and reduction of vitamin B1, B2, and folic acid. The elderly must totally abstain from smoking cigarettes which raises their blood pressure up by 10-15 points. Smoking can lead to difficulty in breathing or even cause cardiac arrest. They must stay away from smokers and avoid smoking cigarettes so that their life span is not short ended.

g. The elderly should be provided with stress education. Homer (1990) describes stress in an individual as any interference that disturbs a person's healthy mental and physical well being. It occurs when the body is required to perform beyond its normal range of capabilities. Lazarus (1997) defines stress as a generalized non-specific, response of the body to demanding stimulus events. The medical manifestation of stress include hypertension, functional disturbances of the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, irritations of bowels headaches diabetes eczema among others.

Psychosocial manifestation of stress include depression anxiety aggression destructive behaviours irritability, hostility apathy withdrawnness smoking, excessive indulgence in alcoholic beverages and compulsive eating, this type of eating has no relationship with physiological hunger, just to escape from some social problems, poor social interactions skills and so on. Education on the treatment of stress (stress reduction methods) is essential for the elderly, because of their age. They are vulnerable to stress including stroke. The elderly need to be taught stress reduction and prevention techniques.

CONCLUSION

Every individual has the right to learn should they wish, and the right to enjoy the rest of their lives, regardless of how long this will be.

The belief that learning opportunities are not viewed as relevant or necessary to older people in long term care need to be addressed. Age and ability have no correlation, and learning opportunities should be made available to everybody wherever they live. According to Boulton-Lewis (2010), learning allows older adults to remain involved in activities that value, socialize and continue with their personal development, it is onun6ly natural that they still want and need to learn. Boulton-Lewis 2010, WHO, (2015). It is important to maintain cognitive abilities in old age for proper functioning at home and in the community. Learning activities for older people promote an active ageing and an engaged lifestyle that help them to maintain their cognitive abilities, increase their social interactions and contribute to the wellness of their environments families and communities.

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