WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL AGING?

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What is normal aging?
- Everyone has an idea of what normal aging is and is not.
- Researchers interest in normative aging exclude persons with acute illness or chronic disease.

1980s: Disenchanted with the normal-diseased dichotomy
- Failed to recognize:
  - heterogeneity of “normal.”
  - clinical observations of successful agers with chronic disease.

Baltes & Baltes
- “Normal” does not tell us what is possible.
- Normal aging subdivided into:
  - usual or typical aging
  - successful aging
  - optimal aging
Clinical Observation: Some older adults with chronic disease appear to age successfully despite their disease.

- 50.3% of older adults say they have aged successfully
- 18.8% can be so categorized with the traditional medical model of successful aging as defined by Rowe & Kahn

Marsiske, Lang, Baltes & Baltes

- Life course perspective
- Success = lifelong adaptation.
- To be a successful ager, an adult must compensate for and cope with failures and with the declines associated with old age.

No unified definition of successful aging

- Phelan & Larson (2002)
- Bowling & Dieppe (2005)

How do researchers define successful aging? Deep & Jeste

- 29 different operational definitions
- 90% included absence of disability or good physical functioning
- Predictors of successful aging:
  - Age
  - Non-smoking
  - Absence of disability, arthritis & diabetes
  - Greater physical activity
  - More social contacts
  - Better self-rated health
  - Absence of depression & cognitive impairment
  - Fewer medical conditions
How do researchers define successful aging? Phelan & Larson

- Life satisfaction
- Freedom from disability
- Longevity
- Mastery/growth
- Active engagement with life
- High/independent functioning
- Positive adaptation

How do researchers define successful aging? Bowling & Dieppe

- Theoretical definitions of successful aging reflect a biomedical or psychosocial approach

How do researchers define successful aging? Bowling & Dieppe

**Biomedical Approaches**
- Life expectancy
- Physical health & functioning, independent functioning
- Mental & psychological health, cognitive function

**Psychosocial Approaches**
- Life satisfaction & well-being
- Personal growth, learning new things
- Social networks, support, participation, activity
- Social, community, leisure activities integration & participation
- Psychological characteristics & resources
What is missing from these theoretical definitions of successful aging? Spirituality

What do older adults say about successful aging?

Von Faber, et al.
- Quantitative data → 599 participants age 85+
- Qualitative data → 27 in-depth interviews
  - Adaptation process, not state of being
  - Valued well-being & social functioning more than physical, psychological or cognitive functioning.

Fisher
- 40 foster grandparents age 61 to 92 living in Missouri
- Qualitative analysis of open-ended survey
  - Life satisfaction emphasized basic need fulfillment & is a precursor to successful aging
  - 5 features of successful aging:
    - Interactions with others
    - Sense of purpose
    - Self-acceptance
    - Personal growth
    - Autonomy
What do older adults say about successful aging? Phelan, et al.

- 1918 older white Americans enrolled in HMO & 970 Japanese Americans
- By survey asked:
  - if they had thought about aging & successful aging, and if these thoughts had changed over past 20 years.
  - to rate the importance of specific attributes that characterize successful aging found in lit.
- Cohorts agreed on 13 attributes & white Americans added an additional attribute (learn new things).

Important attributes that characterize successful aging:
- Remaining in good health until close to death
- Being able to take care of self until close to death
- Remaining free of chronic disease
- Having friends and family who are there for me
- Being able to make choices about diet, exercise, and smoking
- Being able to cope with the challenges of my later years
- Being able to meet all of my needs and some of my wants
- Being able to act according to my own standards and values
- Feeling good about myself
- Feeling satisfied with my life the majority of the time
- Staying involved with the world and people around me
- Adjusting to changes that are related to aging
- Not feeling lonely or isolated
- Learning new things

What do older adults say about successful aging? Bowling & Dieppe

- National (Britain) random population survey
- 854 community-dwelling adults age 50+
- 75% rated themselves as aging successfully
- Open-ended definitions of successful aging
  - Having good health & functioning
  - Psychological factors
  - Able to maintain social roles & activities
  - Financial security
  - Good social relationships
  - Retiring in a safe neighborhood
  - Spirituality

Should clinicians incorporate positive spirituality into their practices? Larimore, Parker, & Crowther (2002)

- Most patients:
  - desire to be offered basic spiritual care by their clinicians
  - are critical of health professions for ignoring their spiritual needs
- Successful aging has been associated with physical & health benefits of committed religious practice.
- Positive spirituality via religious identity & private religious practice helps older adults cope.
Why are definitions important?
Applications for physical therapists:

- Importance of asking older patients/clients their views on successful aging.
- Ensure mutual understanding of health goals, values, & priorities.
- Periodically reassess.
- Help individuals adapt to the challenges associated with old age & chronic disease.

Thank you for listening.
Questions?

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