

Lifelong Learning and Cognitive Decline of Elderly

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Abstract

Cognitive decline or psychological ageing is a problem when it occurs in the thought process or a decline in mental processes due to old age. It includes loss of memory, learning disability, concentration difficulties, in other words slowing down of mental processes. The researchers also suggest that reduced mental stimulation may lead to a decrease in cognitive functioning as people grow older. An enriched environment is very important for an ageing person to deal with the cognitive decline. Lifelong learning is one of the ways to stay mentally active in old age which helps preventing psychological ageing. Instead of ending education at a specific age, one should keep on learning and enhancing knowledge. School and college is not the only way to acquire knowledge. After finishing study at a point of time is not the end of acquiring knowledge. It may be acquired afterwards also through self directed continued learning termed as Lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is the continued learning/education or information gathering to enrich one's knowledge through various methods like educational tours, community service, use of internet, attending workshops, getting involved in enriching discussion with the people of varied areas etc. Lifelong learning is the one of the significant ways to keep oneself active after the age of retirement. After the retirement people start feeling worthless. By

virtue of this feeling of worthlessness problems start in the elderly. With the feeling of worthlessness the psychological ageing starts, which changes their self concept about themselves and further it affects their self esteem.

Introduction

Mental Decline or Psychological Aging is what a person after a certain age feels that he is no longer young and active mentally. Elderly are always compared with young people and are regarded as social burden, useless and unwanted. Because of this social status they develop feeling of inferiority and resentment in them. The common thought about the elderly is that they are ineffective and tired, both, physically and mentally. They are considered as burden on the society, not considered intelligent in comparison to young people, dependent and so on. Generally, the period of decline or aging is when; a person has a less physical strength, vigor and speed of reaction which has been divided into three stages. First is Senescence: this stage is what when the decline is slow and can be compensated with little efforts. Second is senility: in this stage there is a complete physical and mental breakdown. Third is senile: this stage is more of mental than physical as aged person becomes eccentric, careless, absent-minded, socially withdrawn and poorly adjusted. Old age is viewed and treated differently. When social attitude is positive towards the elderly and they are given respect and authority it slows down their mental decline remarkably. If they are mentally active, they feel more confident, are more self-reliant, have positive self-concept and high self-esteem. When a

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person gets older with all these characteristics, it is called active ageing. The World Health Organization defines the active ageing as “the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance their quality of life as people age.” “Health” includes physical, mental, and social well-being and encourages older adults to stay as active as possible to extend healthy life expectancy. (1)

The researchers also suggest that reduced mental stimulation may lead to a decrease in cognitive functioning as people grow older. An enriched environment plays an important role in active ageing and helping older adults to decrease cognitive and emotional decline.

Signs of mentally healthy person

If an old person has following characteristics, he is considered mentally healthy:

- Emotional Intelligence: If person is able to perceive accurately emotions of oneself and others, attains mastery over his own emotions, shows right emotion at right time, he is emotionally intelligent.
- High self-esteem: It is a person’s overall emotional evaluation of his or her own worth. If a person is positive towards himself/herself, his/her self-esteem will always be high. It comes when a person is positive towards his own self- image.
- Positive self-concept: High self-esteem leads to positive self-concept. Self concept embodies the answers to “who am I?” Positive self concept leads to enhancement of self- esteem.
- Always motivated: People who are mentally healthy are always enthusiastic towards life and are able to take up new responsibilities and challenges.
- Positive Attitude towards life: They are always happy in any circumstances no matter how difficult and tough they are and move forward in their life with all of vigor and zeal.
- Always high in spirit: Those who are mentally healthy are high in spirit like they are calm, positive optimistic. It leads to stress free life.

All the characteristics of a person mentally healthy person show that he is in the high life state. The high life state of a person can only be achieved if a person is mentally healthy. In order to achieve that state lifelong learning plays a great role which can’t be ignored in any case.

Benefits of Lifelong learning

Active ageing is defined as the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age (1). It is proved by many studies that if elderly are mentally active in their old age they are able to lead a healthy life, mentally and physically. Lifelong learning is one the means to attain that. It helps the elderly to get new information of various fields which helps them to maintain the zeal of the young age.

Exercising the brain as much as exercising the body to keep both fit and healthy has become the new mantra for the aging, baby boomer generation. Studies show that people who were cognitively active throughout their lives are less likely to experience mental decline as they grow older. Lifelong learning or education may improve the odds for preventing cognitive decline. People who stay cognitively active may be able to use their brain more efficiently. (3) After a certain age older adults have a fixed notion in their minds that there is a certain age of learning which they have already crossed and it is not possible now to learn further or they may think that they have studied enough and now there is no need to learn more. They generally get reluctant to learn new things and turn passive towards the further learning. They forget that lifelong learning is a constant process and it never stops at any stage of life. Instead of making efforts to learn further they depend on others, not that they are unable to learn but because of laziness and negative attitude towards the learning. Those who have that notion and possess that attitude, tend to face cognitive decline in old age. Lifelong learning helps to develop natural abilities. Every individual is unique and has some or the other innate potential. After the age of retirement, elderly can explore and develop these abilities through lifelong learning.

- Lifelong learning opens the mind: Lifelong learning gives an opportunity to the elderly to exchange the ideas and viewpoints with others when they are up-to- date with regards to what is happening around.
- Lifelong learning creates a curious, hungry mind and increases wisdom: If people are into lifelong learning they always crave for new information, events, discoveries, politics, trans-culture society and are curious all the time which leads them to analyze and rationalize the environment, which in turn helps them to think logically and wisely.
- Lifelong learning helps an individual to adapt to the environment: Society is always changeable. Changes are very fast, especially technological changes. If people are unable to meet the pace of change they will lag behind, which causes lack

of confidence and feelings of worthlessness. They ultimately end up with low self-esteem.

- Lifelong learning keeps them involved as active contributors to society: It gives the opportunity to take part in educational programs, traveling and offering one's expertise to society through meaningful community involvement. The idea of others towards the older adult that elderly is not a strain on society but an incredible asset is enough to keep their moral high, which ultimately leads to good mental health.
- Lifelong learning leads to an enriching life of self-fulfillment: Through lifelong learning, a person can maintain a high self-esteem which gives him a sense of fulfillment.

Mental and Psychological wellbeing and lifelong learning

Cognitive decline leads to many mental health ailments. Cognitive decline can be prevented by staying mentally healthy. Lifelong learning is one of the solutions. People can stay active throughout their lifespan by participating in social, cultural, economic, spiritual, and civic affairs. This kind of participation also enhances knowledge of a person which is also one of the forms of lifelong learning. It has a significant role in life to maintain mental and psychological health. Lifelong learning leads to mental hygiene which prevents mental ailments. Gerontological research has shown that enriched learning environment can help reduce cognitive decline due to ageing, as well as helping older adults deal with depression and poor self-image. People can stay healthy throughout their lifespan by participating in social cultural economic, spiritual and civic affairs (2).

Mental hygiene is the preservation and promotion of mental health as well as prevention and treatment of mental illness or abnormalities. It is a practice when there is no mental ailment and psychological problem. It is the way to prevent them. Without knowledge and information about the mental ailments and its

prevention it is not possible to attain the mental health. Mental hygiene is to be practiced only through the lifelong learning. It leads to contentment, optimism, happiness, calmness, having faith and trust, belief in the philosophy etc. All these signs are of a mentally healthy person. Adult educators are under the notion that "you can't teach old dogs new tricks". But studies have revealed that, the decline is that of speed of learning not intellectual power. Knowles (1975) noted that older adult learn new tricks better than younger person. They have the potential and ability to learn.

Conclusion

Elderly, engaged in some or the other activities are relatively healthier than the general elderly population. The lifelong learning is the foremost way among those activities. It gives people an opportunity to learn more, which increases self confidence, makes elderly aware of their rights, maintains their health, keeps them well informed about politics and so on. It increases their employability also after the retirement which is a great boon for them. Finally, it can be said that Lifelong learning gives older adults a feeling of accomplishment and enrichment which ultimately leads to good psychological and mental health.

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