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Addressing the Mental Health Care Needs of the Frail Elderly

Medical Science

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ABSTRACT

The share of India's population aged 60 and older is projected to climb from 8 percent in 2010 to 19 percent in 2050. Data are lacking on the health and social support of India's growing elderly population and concern is mounting about their well-being. Having positive attitudes such as a sense of value, being open and tolerant of new ways of doing things, and being willing to learn can contribute to their wellbeing.

The burden of chronic diseases is rapidly increasing worldwide. It has been calculated that, in 2001, chronic diseases contributed approximately 60% of the 56.5 million total reported deaths in the world and approximately 46% of the global burden of disease. The proportion of the burden of NCDs is expected to increase to 57% by 2020 (WHO, 2001).Chronic diseases account for about 80% of the global burden of disease, according to the DALY's (Disability Adjusted Life Years). While cancer, diabetes and heart disease contribute mainly to the major amounts of deaths every year, much of the burden of other chronic diseases like stroke, dementia and mental disorders arises from disability among the elderly. So, the prevention and management of elderly population is of utmost importance.

It is said that India's older population will increase dramatically over the next four decades. The share of India's population aged 60 and older is projected to climb from 8 percent in 2010 to 19 percent in 2050, according to the United Nations Population Division (UN 2011). By mid-century, India's 60 years and older population is expected to cross 300 million people, more than the population of some developed countries like United States and Great Britain. This paradigm shift in the share of older Indians—taking place in the context of changing family relationships, budding nuclear families and severely limited old-age income support—brings with it a variety of social, economic, and health care policy challenges.

India, having an approximate population of 1.2 billion people, is soon projected to overtake China to become the world's most populous country. In a study conducted by Bloom in 2011, he reports the share of India's population aged 50 and older relatively small at 16 percent, but notes that India will experience rapid growth among this age group. The United Nations Population Division projects that India's population aged 50 and older will reach 34 percent by 2050 (UN 2011).

To examine the health as well as the economic and social well-being of Indian's elderly population, the Longitudinal Aging Study in India (LASI) followed a nationally representative sample of roughly 30,000 Indians aged 45 and older over time. LASI is modeled after the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) in the United States. Data are lacking on the health, social support, and economic security of India's growing elderly population and concern is mounting about the well-being of this expanding group. By assembling a research team of demographers, economists, medical doctors, sociologists, and public health and policy experts, LASI aims to supply the data needed to take stock of the situation of India's elderly population. It is hoped that this evidence base will contribute to cross-national studies of aging and will inform the design of policies that can protect and support the growing elderly community. In 2010, the LASI pilot phase surveyed a representative sample of nearly 1,700 Indians ages 45 and older in four states (Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab, and Rajasthan), chosen to reflect the nation's regional, cultural, and socioeconomic variation. Early results from the LASI pilot offer a variety of findings that illustrate the health risks faced by older Indians (Arokiasamy et al., 2013). Thirteen percent of older Indians sampled have some type of disability that affects at least one activity of daily living leading to severe psychological distress.

Promoting the Mental Health of Older People

It is important to recognize that older persons experience a variety of transitions and changes at a time in life when their coping skills, physical abilities, emotional stability, social contacts, and financial resources may all be decreasing. As noted by Myers & Shannonhouse in 2009, the older person is much more likely to face multiple, sequential losses at this time in their life that leads to a compounded grief process. What this means is that with each loss there is a cumulative effect.

Mental health is normally described in a positive sense as the ability of a person to maintain a healthy emotional and behavioral state. The promotion of mental health should therefore include a wide range of activities for people with very different styles of life. Generally, older people benefit from the same positive steps for mental health as anyone else (Katula.J et al, 2007). Activities that have been shown to promote mental health include physical exercise, spirituality and creative activities, opportunities to strengthen social, coping or life skills, and access and increase the social support and social networks. Opportunities to talk through problems get brief counseling, to relax, to ask for and receive help when needed and keeping in touch with friends are important factors for enabling the elderly to cope during the difficult times.

Further, health promotion interventions have shown to have positive effects on mental health of the elderly. Older people themselves have identified several key factors that promote mental health and wellbeing in later life (Friedli. L, 2007). For many older people, having the family around and being in their midst is the most important factor in promoting positive mental health. Having positive attitudes such as a sense of value, being open and tolerant of new ways of doing things, and being willing to learn can contribute to wellbeing. Keeping physically, mentally and socially active and interacting with others, strengthening family ties and other support networks are seen as essential to maintaining mental health. In addition, retaining independence and choice in retirement and accommodation are important for promoting wellbeing [Jané-Llopis, E., 2008].

1. Providing opportunities for activities

Several forms of involvement in meaningful activities among the elderly have been found to increase wellbeing and improve the mental health. Creative activities participating in arts and performance, visiting libraries, museums and other cultural events boosts the mental health of the older people.

Additional forms of beneficial participation include community development initiatives involving older people and volunteering, which can increase the mental wellbeing of both the volunteer and also those who receive the services.

2. Promoting healthy lifestyle choices

Many elderly people identify good health as the most important determinant of a high quality of life. The factors that contribute to good physical health include genetic predisposition, healthy lifestyles and choices, socioeconomic factors and environmental factors (Cattan, M. 2009). Many older people consider themselves to be in good health, despite having a limiting long-term illness which restricts their daily activities. Many of the chronic conditions that affect people in later life can be prevented or delayed if people are able to adopt healthy lifestyles, for example through exercise, a healthy diet, not smoking and reducing alcohol intake. Provision of aids and adaptations can help people to keep mobile and achieve small day to day activities of daily living. Providing information, encouragement and opportunities for older people to make healthy lifestyle choices are methods by which one can promote positive mental health.

3. Providing opportunities for physical activity and exercising

Exercising leads to increased mental wellbeing, psychological benefits as well as better physical health and functional ability. There's strong scientific evidence that people who are active have a lower risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, depression and dementia (Brenner.H et al, 1998). Most people,as they get older want to keep in touch with society, their community, friends and neighbors and being active is a way to ensure that they can keep doing that. Different types of exercise have benefits for mood, self-esteem, stress, sleep and preventing or alleviating the symptoms of depression and anxiety. The participation of older people in physical activities requires safe and healthy indoor and outdoor environments (Lee, M. 2006). Research shows that it's never too late to adopt and reap the health benefits from a more active lifestyle. For example, older adults who are active will reduce their risk of heart disease and stroke to a similar level as younger people who are active.

4. Enhancing community participation

Enabling the engagement in the social activities of the older people's residence and the wider community is one important measure to support the mental health of older people. Providing opportunities for participating in the political, economic and cultural decision-making of the community and lifelong learning are means by which to ensure social participation (Lis, K et al, 2008).

5. Strengthening positive relationships

Positive and secure relationships with family members, friends and neighbors are important for good mental health among the elderly. The importance of spiritual belief can also be recognized and access to these activities should be ensured. A satisfying sexual life is also a component of good mental health for older people. Social isolation and discrimination is a strong risk factor for poor mental health. Living alone is a positive experience for some older people, because it means independence, self-support, and autonomy. However, for others it might mean feeling lonely, especially if they have difficulties getting out of their home. Therefore, befriending programs to help the older person in his or her everyday life should be organized by the community. Different kinds of clubs, recreation centers and social networks can help prevent loneliness and isolation. Recognizing the skills and knowledge that older people can contribute and providing opportunities in which to share these with people of all ages will help prevent isolation.

6. Providing opportunities for safe and independent living

Feelings of independence and autonomy are important for older people and many of them want to live in their own homes on their terms as long as possible. This can be enhanced for example by supporting the establishment of so-called smart-home solutions and by providing equipment to help communication and mobility. In addition, provision of home help and other domiciliary services, assistance with home improvements to provide basic amenities and assistance with housing adaptations are means to enable independent living. It is also important to recognize and tackle any abuse and violence that affects older people and to support older people who have been victims of crime or violence, to enable them to cope with any consequent physical and psychological ill-effects.

7. Providing appropriate health and social services

Mental health and general health are strongly interrelated and this is particularly evident among the older age groups. Poor physical health, social isolation, poor support systems and poverty are clear risk factors for mental ill-health (Stengard, E, 2005). Therefore, it is important to establish a health and social care system that provides all older people with high quality primary and specialty health services, including easy access to psychiatric services, as well as all the necessary social services and benefits (e.g. transport services and interventions to improve housing conditions). Older people want to have enough money to afford decent housing, travel, social activities and occasional treats that allow full participation in family and community life. Individual retirement schemes give older people the choice to keep working in later life to maintain or increase their income.

8. Combating ageism

Negative and discriminating attitudes toward old age and older people still prevail in society today. Therefore, the people should ensure that human rights are not violated with regard to older persons. Any kind of discriminations should not be tolerated. Age equality should be promoted particularly within mental health promotion. It is important that older people have full opportunity to participate in the social, cultural, economic and political decision-making processes of the society. Intergenerational activities can be used to promote the understanding and respect between younger and older people.

Conclusion

While the elderly population is faced with many barriers that continue to restrict their movement, increased disability and contribute to decreased mental health, there are innovative ways in which the mental health professionals can do to ease the distress experienced by the elderly. Along with the psychosocial interventions, there needs to be policy changes at all levels to cope with the mental health crisis facing the nation's elderly.

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