

Healthy aging and psychological wellness: Enhancing elderly care in India



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Abstract

India's ageing population is growing at a rapid rate, making it imperative to find practical ways to support psychological well-being and age well. Despite of playing active roles in society, mental health issues are specific to older persons and are made worse by ailments including hearing loss and chronic pain. In India, barriers to adequate geriatric psychiatric care include limited resources, inadequate training, and pervasive ageism. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes raising awareness, enhancing training, and integrating mental and physical health services. This newsletter explores the challenges of promoting psychological wellness among the elderly, such as age-related stigma and healthcare workforce shortages. It also highlights innovative solutions like telepsychiatry, home-based care, and the role of clinical pharmacists in improving care. Emphasizing the need for improved social support, education, and community involvement, it advocates for comprehensive strategies to enhance the well-being and quality of life for India's aging population.

Keywords: Telepsychiatry, Healthy Aging, Psychiatric Care

1. Introduction

The importance of psychological wellness and healthy ageing is becoming more and more clear as the world's population ages. The ageing population in India is expanding quickly, posing both new opportunities and challenges for the healthcare system. Despite popular belief, older people are active members of society who serve a variety of roles rather than just being a burden. Many still work, take care of their grand-children, keep up with housework, and provide for their family (1). Most remarkably, a sizable portion of them maintain their independence while exhibiting resiliency and flexibility in the face of age-related obstacles.

People who are older have particular mental health difficulties, with psychological problems frequently coexisting with medical illnesses such as hearing loss or chronic pain. This disparity is particularly noticeable in India, where geriatric psychiatry encounters obstacles such as low knowledge, few training opportunities, unequal resource allocation, and a dearth of all-encompassing chronic care models (1). The coverage is inadequate in spite of government programs and initiatives like Shantanu Naidu's Goodfellows. In order to close these gaps, we must raise awareness, build capacity, strengthen research and training, create creative community-based rehabilitation initiatives, and create a strong primary health care system specifically for the elderly.

This newsletter article addresses the prospects and difficulties in fostering psychological wellbeing and healthy ageing in India. It also looks at ways to improve care for the elderly, emphasising the role of clinical chemists and other healthcare professionals. Healthy aging involves maintaining physical health, cognitive function, emotional well-being, and social engagement as individuals grow older. It involves not only the absence of disease, but also the presence of positive health outcomes and quality of life. Psychological wellness encompasses mental health and emotional stability. For older adults, psychological wellness is crucial as it directly impacts their overall health and quality of life.

2. The growing elderly population in India

The UN predicts that the senior population in India (those 60 and above) will double from 8% in 2015 to 16% in 2050, reflecting the country's dramatic demographic shift. The healthcare system has both opportunities and challenges as a result of this demographic transformation. Although longer life expectancies are a result of better living conditions and medical progress, they also highlight the necessity of an all-encompassing approach to senior care. The unique mix of health status, social backgrounds, and cultural contexts that make up India's senior population necessitates a multimodal healthcare approach that takes into account their psychological as well as their physical requirements. The frequency of age-related health issues, including as chronic illnesses, impairments, and psychological disorders, is rising along with the senior population. Thus, it is imperative to emphasize the maintenance of physical and mental health as well as healthy ageing.

3. Challenges in promoting psychological wellness among the elderly

3.1. Ageism and societal attitudes

Ageism, or age-based prejudice, seriously impairs the psychological well-being of the elderly by sustaining stereotypes that present them as weak and reliant. These unfavourable views might affect mental health by causing social isolation and limiting access to healthcare. It will need a shift in society and the encouragement of positive ageing attitudes that emphasise the contributions and worth of older persons to eradicate ageism (2).

3.2. Workforce shortages

India needs additional geriatricians, psychologists, and clinical chemists who specialize in the special requirements of older persons because there is a severe scarcity of healthcare professionals in the country who are trained in providing geriatric care. By addressing this need with focused training initiatives and financial rewards, more workers with training will be hired, guaranteeing thorough and specialized care for the elderly (3).

3.3. Loneliness and social isolation

Elderly loneliness, often caused by social isolation, the death of loved ones, or decreased mobility, can lead to depression and anxiety. Social support systems, technology-based therapies, and community involvement are essential for maintaining psychological wellness and preventing mental health disorders among older adults (4).

3.4. Stigma surrounding mental health

Many senior citizens who suffer from psychological problems do not seek treatment because of stigma and misconceptions regarding mental health difficulties. They may be afraid of being judged or may not be able to identify symptoms. Campaigns for public health and community education can help increase mental health literacy and awareness, which will motivate more senior citizens to seek professional assistance rather than relying on internet videos for self-diagnosis.

3.5. Limited access to mental health services

Due to financial and geographic constraints, older persons' access to mental health care is sometimes restricted, particularly in impoverished and rural locations. It's imperative to grow home-based care and telepsychiatry to make sure senior citizens get the assistance they require (5).

4. Social determinants of psychological health

The main ways in which the social determinants of health have an impact on older people's psychological wellness:

4.1. Economic stability

Older adults' psychological well-being depends heavily on their financial stability. Economic volatility can cause stress and anxiety due to factors like poverty and resource scarcity, which emphasizes the significance of social welfare programs in ensuring that people have access to the healthcare they need.

4.2. Education and health literacy

Having a basic understanding of health issues helps older persons take charge of their own care. Seniors' access to care and general well-being can be enhanced by encouraging education and health literacy because these skills will enable them to make wise decisions and successfully navigate the healthcare system.

4.3. Social support and community involvement

Reducing loneliness and preserving psychological wellness require robust social networks and community involvement. Promoting community involvement and establishing nurturing surroundings.

5. Strategies for enhancing elderly care in India

5.1. Primary prevention: Focuses on reducing the risk factors before the onset of a psychological disorder.

5.2. Secondary prevention: Involves early detection and prompt intervention to manage symptoms and halt progression.

5.3. Tertiary prevention: Aims at softening the impact of an ongoing illness or injury that has lasting effects.

6. Integration of psychological and physical healthcare

Complete care for the elderly requires the integration of physical and mental health services. In order to facilitate the integration of mental and physical health services, psychological healthcare ought to be offered at the primary healthcare level. For those with more severe psychological problems, specialized services are needed, and continuity and high-quality care are ensured by efficient coordination between various levels of care (6).

6.1. Self-care and lifestyle interventions

It is feasible to prevent a number of psychological health disorders in older persons by implementing self-care strategies, such as stress reduction, lifestyle adjustment, and early detection of prodromal symptoms. Preventing the emergence of mental health difficulties and promoting psychological wellbeing can be achieved by encouraging older persons to embrace healthy lifestyles that include regular physical activity, a balanced diet, and stress-reduction practices.

6.2. Training and education of healthcare professionals

Improving care for the elderly requires investing in the education and training of healthcare personnel. Medical and non-medical staff members must receive ongoing training in order for psychological healthcare to be successfully integrated into primary healthcare. Auxiliary nurse midwives (ANM), medical officers, and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) are among the main healthcare occupations for which training manuals have been developed as part of the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP). ASHA employees' comprehension of elderly psychological health issues has improved as a result of their training in geriatric mental health (7).

6.3. Geriatric telepsychiatry services

A useful option for providing psychological healthcare to senior citizens, particularly those living in isolated or underdeveloped locations, is telepsychiatry services. The COVID-19 epidemic brought attention to the need for telepsychiatry, which allows medical practitioners to provide therapy from a

distance. Geographical obstacles can be removed with telepsychiatry, giving senior citizens access to specialized mental health services and enabling them to interact with medical specialists on their own or with family support (8).

6.4. Home-based geriatric psychological healthcare

Encouraging home-based geriatric psychological care is essential for elderly patients with limited access to healthcare or mobility issues. Home visits by health professionals ensure that seniors receive the necessary care in a comfortable environment, particularly benefiting those with physical or mental impairments (9).

The figure 1 highlights the role of clinical pharmacists in geriatric psychological wellness, focusing on medication management, patient education, collaboration with healthcare teams, research, and policy advocacy. These efforts aim to optimize drug therapy, enhance patient self-management, and shape a healthcare system that prioritizes the needs of older adults.

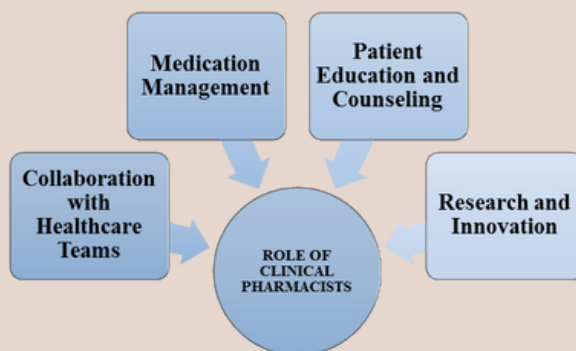


Figure 1. Role of clinical pharmacists in geriatric psychological wellness

7. Conclusion

The India's elderly population grows, promoting healthy aging and psychological wellness becomes increasingly vital. Addressing challenges such as ageism, loneliness, limited healthcare, and workforce shortages requires a comprehensive approach. Shifting societal attitudes towards aging is essential to recognize the value and contributions of older adults, ensuring they receive care and support they need.

Healthcare professionals, including clinical pharmacists, play a crucial role in managing medications, educating patients, and collaborating across disciplines. Integrating psychological and physical healthcare, expanding mental health services, and encouraging self-care and lifestyle changes are key to supporting the holistic well-being of the elderly.

Additionally, addressing social determinants of health such as economic stability, education, and social support can help reduce health inequalities and improve psychological wellness among older adults. Innovative strategies like telepsychiatry and home-based care are promising solutions to overcome geographical barriers and provide necessary support. Investing in training for healthcare professionals in geriatric care and fostering research and innovation will help develop evidence-based practices to meet the growing needs of the elderly population.

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