

Special Needs of Geriatric Patients



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Special Needs of Geriatric Patients

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Statistics show that an increasing number of geriatric patients are being seen in health care settings and that number is expected to rise because of population trends and medical use. Caring for geriatric patients brings forth special challenges that can be met by understanding the biological and psychological changes taking place as people age. This course identifies the developmental stages, physical and psychological needs and appropriate interventions specific to geriatric patients.

After completing this article, the reader should be able to:

- Understand developmental stages of geriatric patients.
- Distinguish between typical age-related changes and pathological disease processes in older people.
- Identify physical and psychological needs of geriatric patients as they relate to health care.
- Apply appropriate interventions specific to geriatric patients.
- Discuss age-specific competencies.
- Explain advance directives.

Introduction

As the percentage of elderly people increases, more of these patients may be seen in hospital or ambulatory settings. The care of elderly patients in these settings brings special challenges to caregivers. Many of these challenges can be met by understanding the biological and psychological changes that take place as people age. Society's attitudes toward aging have produced a negative image of this time of life, even though elderly people live their late years in a wide range of physical and emotional states. The ironies of aging may be difficult for the patient to understand and communicate (see Box 1).¹

Theories of Development

Some people assume that old age is not a developmental process but rather one of decline. This life stage demands that people develop skills to adjust to biological changes, reflect on the meaning of their existence, and prepare for death. If adjustment is completed successfully,

individuals may approach this phase of life with a sense of satisfaction and psychosocial well-being. However, development in old age is complicated by reduced emotional, physical, and social reserves.²

Most theories of aging focus on the themes mentioned above. These theories have evolved as part of a life-span approach to human development or because of an increased emphasis on the study of elderly disease and development. Development in later life may be more highly individualized than the universal development seen in infants because of older adults' unique personal experiences.³

Erikson

Erik Erikson was the first theorist to view the life cycle as a continuum, with aging as the last of 8 stages.⁴ His 1950 psychosocial theory of development is based on a specific crisis central to each life stage. The crisis arises out of conflict between 2 opposite tendencies.³ For Stage 8, generally including those age 65

years and older, the fundamental issue is ego integrity vs despair.⁴ Additional conflicts include trust vs mistrust, autonomy vs shame, industry vs inferiority, and intimacy vs isolation. The major task of old age is to accept one's life as having been satisfying and whole.^{2,4}

More simply put, those who do not successfully complete Erikson's final stage may feel they could have lived their lives differently and are dissatisfied or disappointed with the way they continue to live their lives. Those who are successful and achieve ego integrity can calmly accept aging and death as the natural conclusion to a life that has been satisfying and filled with dignity.⁵ The life-span approach taken by Erikson provided a foundation for subsequent developmental theories.⁴

Peck

Robert Peck's theory of development further delineated 3 levels of ego integrity. Peck included the role of work in ego development, as well as the specific role of declining body functions and acceptance of these changes. Specifically, Peck's developmental tasks for later life were ego differentiation vs work-role preoccupation, body transcendence vs body preoccupation, and ego transcendence vs ego preoccupation.

Peck theorized that in the middle years, a person's sense of identity, as well as feelings of worth and satisfaction, are for the most part dependent on occupation. Once retirement occurs or a homemaker faces an empty nest, a person may experience a period of declining well-being.⁵ The individual who makes the shift from ego based on work role to satisfaction with one's self as a person will successfully complete this transition.²

Because most changes in the body's systems after age 30 tend toward loss or decline, preoccupation with dwindling body function can lead to decline in self-worth and well-being.⁵ Those who do not define self based on physical limitations or health problems and who find psychological pleasure can successfully complete the later stage of life. Peck's task of ego transcendence vs ego preoccupation is similar to Erikson's model, in that successful development is likely if the individual can gain and emphasize pleasure through reflection on a life that has been lived well rather than dwelling on how little time may be left.²

Box 1

A Crabbit Old Woman Wrote This¹

What do you see nurses, what do you see?
What are you thinking when you are looking at me —
A crabbit old woman, not very wise
Uncertain of habit, with far away eyes.
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply
When you say in a loud voice — "I do wish you'd try."
Who seems not to notice the things that you do.
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe.
Who unresisting or not, lets you do as you will,
With bathing and feeding, the long day to fill.
Is that what you are thinking — is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse, you're not looking at me.
I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still;
As I do your bidding, as I follow your will,
I'm a small child of 10 with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters, who love one another.

A young girl of 16 with wings on her feet,
Dreaming that soon now a lover she'll meet,
A bride soon at 20 — my heart gives a leap,
Remembering the vows that I promised to keep:
At 25 now I have young of my own,
Who need to build a secure, happy home;
A woman of 30, my young now grow fast,
Bound to each other with ties that should last;
At 40, my young sons have grown and are gone,
But my man's beside me to see I don't mourn.
At 50, once more babies play round my knee,
Again we know children, my loved one and me.
Dark days are upon me, my husband is dead,
I look at the future, I shudder with dread,
For my young are all rearing young of their own,
And I think of the years and the love that I've known.

I'm an old woman now and nature is cruel —
'Tis her jest to make old age look like a fool.
The body it crumbles, grace and vigour depart,
There is now a stone where I once had a heart,
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,
And now and again my battered heart swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the pain,
And I'm loving and living life over again.
I think of the years all too few — gone too fast,
And accept the stark fact that nothing can last.
So open your eyes, nurses, open and see
Not a crabbit old woman, look closer — see ME!

Written by a woman who died in obscurity in an Irish geriatric ward. It was discovered among her few possessions.