19.2: Basic Concepts

Ageism

Gerontology is the study of the social, cultural, psychological, cognitive, and biological aspects of aging. There are many stereotypes and negative attitudes about aging adults that persist in the US and around the world. This bias can be linked to a general lack of knowledge about the aging process and misunderstandings about older adults. Because of these influences, many individuals have anxiety about aging that can lead to negative stereotypes of older individuals called ageism. [1]

Ageism among nurses and other health care professionals puts older people at risk. Research has demonstrated that ageism in health care negatively impacts older adults’ overall health, well-being, and quality of care received. Ageism results in increased risks of mortality, poor functional health, and slower recovery times from illness. Negative perceptions about aging can also lead to poor mental health and depression. [2] As you read this chapter, think about your own attitudes about aging and how these beliefs may impact the care you provide.

Integrity Versus Despair

Aging individuals must continually adjust to changes in health and physical strength, lifestyle changes as a result of retirement, the loss of significant others, and changing roles and relationships with family members and friends. As a result, older individuals may find it difficult to accept the changes associated with aging. Nurses can support older adults in maintaining a positive self-image and outlook by considering Erikson’s theory of development. Erikson’s theory of development describes the stage of older adulthood as “Integrity versus Despair.” This stage begins at approximately age 65 and ends at death. During this stage, older adults reflect on their accomplishments and the person they have
become. If they feel they have led a successful life, they often feel satisfied and develop a sense of integrity. Conversely, individuals who feel unsuccessful or do not feel they achieved their life goals often feel unsatisfied and may experience hopelessness and despair that can lead to depression. Nurses can assist older adults in developing a sense of integrity by encouraging the patient to reminisce about previous positive life events and relationships and cultivate a positive mindset of guiding the next generation.³

Many older adults, especially those with declining health due to chronic disease, acknowledge that changes in their health status and mobility threaten the autonomy and independence they previously experienced throughout adulthood. As a result, many older adults strive to be autonomous so they are not overly reliant on others for their daily care. They often engage in self-management activities in response to changes in their health and physical strength, ranging from simple daily tasks, such as medication management, to more complex tasks, such as relocating to new residences that are better suited to their changes in physical and mental health. Research has found that when older adults are faced with declines in their physical health and/or cognitive abilities, they often draw upon experiences and skills acquired in earlier adulthood for the purpose of self-managing their new conditions. They reflect on their resilience used to overcome significant challenges faced in earlier adulthood and then apply skills and knowledge gained through previously productive activities to managing their new health changes. However, not all older adults have sufficient personal and external resources to devote towards successful self-management of their health conditions. Nurses can assist older adults by personalizing health self-management strategies that emphasize their existing skill sets and knowledge.⁴

Other Considerations

Retirement

In addition to the physiological changes that occur with aging, older adults vary in their level of activity. For example, many older adults continue working into their seventies and beyond. Individuals may choose to continue to work because of their sense of purpose or because of a need for income. Some older individuals experience a loss of identity when they retire because their work role was an important aspect of their life. Retirement can bring a sense of freedom and adventure, as well as a need to find new identity and purpose.

Social Isolation

Retirement and the loss of daily interaction with coworkers, as well as death of family members and friends, can lead to social isolation in the aging population. Social support impacts a person’s health and quality of life and should be included as part of the assessment. It is helpful for nurses to be familiar with community resources that provide socialization opportunities and provide referrals for patients in need of additional services.

Modified Living Environment

Although many aging adults live in assisted living facilities or skilled nursing centers, many older adults prefer to live at home. Modifications may be needed to the home environment to promote safety and independence. For example, grab
bars, elevated toilet seats, and other modifications may be needed in the bathroom, along with good lighting, minimization of clutter, and removal of rugs throughout the home. Assessment of the home environment for safety and ease of mobility is an important aspect of home care nursing.

If an older adult requires more care than family members are able to provide at home, nurses provide valuable information about available care options and make referrals to social workers and case managers. There are a wide variety community-based resources to enhance care for older adults. Local aging and disability resource centers (ADRCs) can help facilitate referrals based on specific needs of the older adult. Examples of other resources include adult day centers, home health agencies that provide personal care and nursing assistance, community-based residential facilities (CBRFs), and residential care apartment complexes (RCACs). If an older adult requires 24-hour nursing care, placement in a nursing home (also referred to as a skilled nursing facility) may be required. Use the following hyperlink to read more information about nursing home resources provided by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS).

**Note**

Learn more about nursing home resources by reviewing the [Nursing Home Resource Center](https://www.cms.gov) provided by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS).


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