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PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS IN OLD AGE AND THEIR FULFILLMENT

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**Annotation:** This study examines the psychological needs of older adults and the mechanisms for their fulfillment. It analyzes key factors influencing mental health and well-being in old age, including emotional regulation, social relationships, autonomy, cognitive engagement, and existential meaning. The research is based on established psychological theories and contemporary gerontological studies. The findings highlight that psychological well-being in later life is shaped by both internal resources and external social conditions. The study concludes that meeting psychological needs is essential for ensuring life satisfaction and successful aging.

**Keywords:** old age, psychological needs, well-being, life satisfaction, aging, emotional stability, social support, autonomy, resilience, mental health, meaning in life, elderly population

Psychological needs in old age represent a complex system of emotional, cognitive, social, and existential requirements that remain essential for maintaining mental health and life satisfaction in later life. Contrary to earlier assumptions that aging is primarily a period of psychological decline, contemporary gerontology and developmental psychology emphasize that older adulthood is a stage where fundamental human needs continue to operate, although their expression and prioritization may change. The fulfillment of these needs plays a central role in determining the quality of life, emotional stability, and subjective well-being of elderly individuals. One of the foundational perspectives on human needs is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which includes physiological needs, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. In old age, while basic physiological and safety needs remain important, psychological needs such as belonging, esteem, and meaning become increasingly central. Maslow's later work also introduced the concept of self-transcendence, which is particularly relevant in old age, as individuals often shift their focus from personal achievement toward contributing to others and reflecting on life meaning.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory provides another essential framework, particularly his final developmental stage: ego integrity versus despair. According to Erikson, older adults experience a psychological need to evaluate their life as a coherent and meaningful whole. Successful resolution of this stage leads to ego integrity, characterized by acceptance of life and reduced fear of death, while failure results in despair, regret, and dissatisfaction. This theory highlights that one of the most important psychological needs in old age is the need for life review and meaning-making. Modern research in developmental psychology also emphasizes the importance of autonomy as a core psychological need in later life. Autonomy refers to the ability to make independent



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decisions and maintain control over one's life. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are basic psychological needs across the lifespan. In old age, maintaining autonomy is strongly associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and reduced depression. Loss of autonomy, often due to physical limitations or institutional care, can significantly negatively affect psychological well-being.

Another fundamental psychological need in old age is the need for relatedness, or meaningful social connection. Extensive research in social psychology, particularly the work of John Cacioppo on loneliness, demonstrates that social isolation is one of the strongest predictors of poor mental health, cognitive decline, and even increased mortality among older adults. Humans remain inherently social beings throughout life, and in old age, the need for emotional closeness, companionship, and belonging becomes even more pronounced due to increasing life losses such as retirement, widowhood, and reduced social networks. Closely related to this is the need for emotional security. Older adults often experience heightened vulnerability due to declining physical health, financial uncertainty, and loss of loved ones. Emotional security involves feeling safe, supported, and valued within one's social environment. Studies in gerontology show that individuals who perceive strong family support and community care report significantly higher levels of psychological well-being.

Cognitive needs also play an important role in old age. While cognitive decline is often associated with aging, research in neuroscience indicates that mental stimulation and lifelong learning can help maintain cognitive functioning through neuroplasticity. The need for cognitive engagement includes problem-solving, learning new skills, and maintaining intellectual curiosity. Failure to meet this need can lead to cognitive stagnation, boredom, and reduced self-esteem. Another significant psychological need is the need for purpose and meaning in life. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy emphasizes that the search for meaning is a fundamental human motivation, and this need does not diminish with age. In fact, it often becomes more important in later life as individuals reflect on their life experiences and future limitations. Older adults often fulfill this need through family roles, mentorship, volunteer work, religious engagement, or creative activities. Empirical studies show that a strong sense of purpose is associated with lower mortality rates and improved mental health outcomes.

The need for self-esteem and recognition is also critical. Older adults require acknowledgment of their life achievements, social contributions, and personal value. According to sociological research, societal attitudes toward aging significantly influence self-esteem in older populations. Ageism, or discrimination based on age, can undermine self-worth and contribute to depression and social withdrawal. Conversely, respect and recognition from society enhance dignity and psychological stability. Health-related psychological needs must also be considered. These include the need for physical comfort, pain management, and access to healthcare services. Chronic illness and physical disability can significantly affect emotional well-being if not properly managed. However,



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psychological adaptation plays a major role in how health conditions influence subjective well-being. Many older adults demonstrate resilience and maintain positive emotional states despite health limitations.

Spiritual and existential needs become increasingly important in old age. Many individuals seek answers to questions related to mortality, life purpose, and existential meaning. Research by Harold Koenig shows that spirituality and religious involvement are strongly associated with reduced depression and increased life satisfaction in older adults. Spiritual practices often provide emotional comfort, hope, and a sense of continuity beyond physical life. Environmental needs also contribute indirectly to psychological well-being. Safe, accessible, and supportive living environments help older adults maintain independence and social participation. Age-friendly environments reduce stress and enhance feelings of security and control, which are essential psychological conditions for well-being.

The fulfillment of psychological needs in old age is strongly dependent on the social environment in which older adults live. Family systems, community structures, healthcare services, and public policies collectively shape the extent to which these needs are satisfied. Among these, family support remains one of the most influential factors in maintaining psychological well-being. Empirical studies in gerontology consistently show that older adults who maintain close and emotionally supportive relationships with children, grandchildren, and spouses report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of depression. Intergenerational interaction provides not only emotional comfort but also a sense of identity, continuity, and social value.

However, modern demographic and social changes, such as urbanization, migration, and the nuclearization of families, have weakened traditional family support systems in many societies. As a result, loneliness and social isolation among older adults have become increasingly common. Research by John Cacioppo and colleagues demonstrates that perceived loneliness is not merely a subjective feeling but a significant risk factor for poor physical health, cognitive decline, and increased mortality. This highlights that the psychological need for relatedness and social connection is fundamental and biologically embedded. Community engagement plays a crucial role in compensating for weakened family ties. Participation in social clubs, religious groups, volunteer organizations, and cultural activities provides older adults with opportunities for interaction, identity reinforcement, and emotional support. Robert Putnam's concept of social capital emphasizes that strong community networks enhance trust, cooperation, and overall well-being. In old age, such networks are essential for fulfilling the need for belonging and reducing social withdrawal.

Healthcare systems also play a direct role in the fulfillment of psychological needs. Access to geriatric care, mental health services, and rehabilitation programs ensures that older adults can maintain both physical and psychological stability. Depression and anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health problems in older populations, yet they are often underdiagnosed and undertreated. According to the World Health



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Organization, depression is a leading cause of disability in older adults worldwide. Therefore, early diagnosis and psychological intervention are critical mechanisms for ensuring emotional well-being. Institutional care, such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities, presents both opportunities and challenges for psychological need fulfillment. On one hand, these institutions provide safety, medical support, and social interaction opportunities. On the other hand, they may reduce autonomy and increase feelings of dependency if not properly managed. Research shows that person-centered care models, which respect individual preferences and promote autonomy, significantly improve psychological outcomes in institutionalized older adults.

Economic security is another essential factor influencing psychological well-being. Retirement often leads to reduced income, which can create financial stress and limit access to healthcare, nutrition, and social participation. Socioeconomic status is strongly correlated with life satisfaction in old age. Older adults with stable pensions and financial independence tend to report higher levels of happiness and lower levels of anxiety. Economic insecurity, in contrast, undermines the psychological need for safety and stability. Education and lifelong learning programs are increasingly recognized as important tools for psychological need fulfillment. Universities of the Third Age and similar programs provide older adults with opportunities to continue intellectual development, acquire new skills, and engage in meaningful social interaction. Lifelong learning supports cognitive stimulation, enhances self-esteem, and fulfills the need for personal growth, which remains important even in later life.

Technological inclusion has emerged as a modern mechanism for fulfilling psychological needs. Digital communication tools such as video calls, messaging applications, and social media platforms enable older adults to maintain relationships despite physical distance. Studies show that older individuals who use digital technologies regularly experience lower levels of loneliness and higher life satisfaction. However, digital literacy remains a barrier, highlighting the importance of training programs and user-friendly technologies designed for older populations. Cultural attitudes toward aging significantly shape psychological need satisfaction. In cultures where older adults are respected and valued, their needs for esteem, belonging, and meaning are more easily fulfilled. In contrast, ageist societies that marginalize older individuals can negatively impact self-esteem and emotional well-being. Ageism has been identified by the World Health Organization as a global public health issue that undermines dignity and psychological health in older populations.

Another important dimension is the role of coping strategies in managing unmet psychological needs. Older adults frequently face unavoidable losses such as bereavement, declining health, and reduced independence. Effective coping mechanisms, including acceptance, positive reappraisal, and spiritual coping, help individuals maintain emotional balance despite these challenges. According to Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory, adaptive coping strategies are essential for maintaining psychological stability under stress. Spirituality and existential meaning remain particularly significant in old age.



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Many older adults rely on religious beliefs or spiritual practices to interpret life events, cope with loss, and find meaning in aging and mortality. Research by Harold Koenig indicates that spirituality is associated with lower levels of depression, greater resilience, and improved overall life satisfaction. This suggests that existential needs become increasingly central in later life. Environmental psychology also highlights the importance of age-friendly living conditions. Safe housing, accessible transportation, and inclusive urban design contribute significantly to psychological comfort and independence. The World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities initiative emphasizes that supportive environments are essential for enabling older adults to remain active and socially engaged.

The psychological needs of older adults and their fulfillment represent a crucial area of gerontological and psychological research, as modern societies continue to experience rapid population aging. The analysis of this topic demonstrates that aging is not merely a biological process of decline, but a complex developmental stage in which individuals continue to seek autonomy, emotional security, social connection, meaning, and self-worth. The satisfaction of these needs determines whether old age is experienced as a period of fulfillment or psychological distress. Overall, research findings confirm that psychological well-being in later life is the result of a dynamic interaction between internal psychological resources and external social conditions. Internal factors such as resilience, coping strategies, emotional regulation, and cognitive appraisal enable older adults to adapt to life changes, including retirement, loss of loved ones, and declining physical abilities. External factors such as family support, healthcare access, financial stability, and social inclusion provide the necessary environment for these psychological processes to function effectively.

Theoretical perspectives from Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, Carol Ryff, and Self-Determination Theory consistently emphasize that psychological needs remain active throughout the lifespan. In particular, the need for autonomy, relatedness, competence, and meaning does not disappear with age; rather, it becomes more sensitive to social and environmental conditions. When these needs are fulfilled, older adults are more likely to experience ego integrity, life satisfaction, and emotional stability. When they are not fulfilled, feelings of loneliness, depression, and despair may emerge. Modern research also highlights the importance of active aging policies and positive psychological interventions. Programs that encourage lifelong learning, social participation, physical activity, and digital inclusion significantly improve the quality of life in older populations. Similarly, psychological interventions such as life review therapy, mindfulness practices, and cognitive-behavioral approaches have been shown to enhance emotional well-being and reduce depressive symptoms.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, psychological needs in old age are essential for maintaining mental health, emotional stability, and life satisfaction. These needs include autonomy, social connection, emotional security, meaning in life, and self-esteem. Their fulfillment depends on a combination of personal psychological resources and external factors such as family



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support, healthcare services, economic stability, and social inclusion. Research shows that older adults who maintain strong social relationships, adapt effectively to life changes, and engage in meaningful activities experience higher levels of psychological well-being. Therefore, ensuring the fulfillment of psychological needs in old age is a key factor in promoting healthy and successful aging.

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