

Quality of life in the elderly: A meta-synthesis

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Most of the elderly suffer from chronic diseases and receive constant treatment, which can influence their quality of life. It is therefore crucial to gain a thorough understanding of the elderly's quality of life with the aim of carrying out proper care and support interventions.

Method: This qualitative meta-synthesis investigated the concept of quality of life among the elderly and the factors that may influence it. Four qualitative, phenomenological studies focusing on the elderly's quality of life were analyzed. Major themes were subsequently extracted and final interpretations were made. At the end, a conceptual framework was proposed for the associations among concepts, dimensions, and influential factors of the elderly's quality of life. All ethical issues were observed in this study and the researchers declared no conflict of interests.

Results: The results indicated that quality of life in the elderly is a complicated and abstract concept consisting of six main dimensions: internal individual factors, external individual factors, health, familial experiences, social interactions, and environmental factors.

Conclusion: Physical health in the elderly relies on individuals' independence, free will, and internal individual factors (including the degree of the interaction between the senior and religious/spiritual resources, which constitute individuals' mental health). Religious and spiritual resources are so integral during old age that they can compensate for the lack of familial and social support. Thus, connection with God will remove loneliness among the elderly, help them adapt themselves to their condition, and improve their quality of life.

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Summary

Background and Objective: Old age is a stage in the evolution of human life. Nowadays, seniors constitute one of the largest social groups in the world (1). Due to higher life expectancy and reduced fertility across the world, aging has become a universal phenomenon (2). According to the report released by the statistical center of Iran, the census of 1390 (based on the solar calendar) showed that 8.26% of Iranian citizens aged over 60. At the present time, the population of Iranian people over 60 is 8 million (2).

Quality of life, which is a complicated concept, can be influenced by various factors in different periods of

life. It is an individualistic notion, meaning that it depends on individuals' personal perceptions. It is assessed based on numerous objective and subjective domains (3). The elderly have a unique quality of life (in comparison with others) because of their old age as well as further experiences and skills. A review of the available literature indicates that most of the studies on the quality of life have been conducted among participants under 65 years of age and have utilized quantitative measures. Few qualitative studies have investigated the live experiences of the elderly. The results of the current study shed light on the concept, dimensions, and influential factors of quality of life among the elderly.

Method: A meta-synthetic approach was adopted in this study to address the following questions:

- What is the elderly's perception of quality of life?
- What are the dimensions/elements of the elderly's quality of life?
- What kind of relationship exists among various dimensions?

In order to conduct a comprehensive search, various data bases – including the electronic library of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Pubmed, and Scopus – were consulted.

Results: The results of four studies, which had used phenomenology to investigate the elderly's live experiences and perceptions of life quality, its dimensions, and influential factors, revealed that quality of life in the elderly is a complicated and abstract concept consisting of six main dimensions:

- Internal individual factors: All four studies pointed to the importance of this factor. It includes philosophy and ideology of life, attention to values, respect, merit, commitment, religious and spiritual beliefs, religion, fear of death, belief in the afterlife, and life meaningfulness.
- External individual factors: All four studies emphasized this factor. It entails a sense of independence and capability in doing daily stuff like decision making, physical activities, and maintenance of personal hygiene.
- Health: Three of the studies mentioned this dimension, which gives primary importance to physical health. It encompasses issues such as enjoying physical health, not suffering from chronic diseases, and not being dependent on drugs and sensory and movement aids (e.g. cane, glasses, and hearing aids).
- Social interactions: This dimension emphasizes individuals' role in the society and the social support that they receive. It was highlighted in three of the studies and includes volunteering in religious activities, helping others, and being altruistic and friendly.
- Familial experiences: This dimension, which was pinpointed in two studies, emphasizes family relations. It entails interaction with family members, sense of dignity, and respect for values and ideas of the family seniors.
- Environmental factors: It was mentioned in all the four studies. It mainly focuses on environmental and social supports. It entails the support received from the society, government, and NGOs. The support may include financial advantages, insurance, and senior cards.

Conclusion: Old age has its specific features. In this time, individuals reach maximum maturity and integrity, gain a lot of experience, undergo physical changes, and experience a shift in their worldview. Because the elderly have few worldly attachments, their value-laden view changes in this period. As a result of these changes and the fact that the elderly are in the last stage of their lives, they pay a lot of attention to religion, have strong belief in the afterlife and

spirituality, and feel the presence of God in their lives. Thus, they are able to adapt themselves to the special conditions of this period of life. Indeed, many seniors are deprived of familial and social support; however, their connection to God compensates this social deprivation. Therefore, they self-report a good life quality and are happy with their lives (4).

Individual, social, and environmental factors that influence the elderly's quality of life affect their performance. The results of the current study corroborates Djeker's quality of life pattern (5). In this regard, strengthening internal individual factors is encouraging in all stages of life. Nonetheless, special attention should be paid to these factors among the elderly because old people have stronger religious tendencies in their solitude and try to adopt strategies that make up for the deficiencies of this period of life. Internal individual factors also constitute the best way for adapting oneself to the special conditions of old age, gaining maximal satisfaction, and achieving the highest quality of life.

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