

MANAGING OLD AGE, DISTRESS AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

It is an inalienable desire of every normal man to advance to an old age. This is not because the Holy Bible gives humanity a 70-years standard in life, but also because life is sweet, and it is the only phenomenon man knows for now in spite of our *made-to-believe faith* 'that Heaven is beautiful. One of our Artist once sang, *'Aye yii ma dara pupo, O dara, O lewa. Aye yii ma dara pupo, O dara, O lewa'*. Old age is therefore everybody's wishes so as to stay longer here. However, it is not everybody that will be so favoured by the Almighty God to get to the class of the Senior citizens. It is a simple understanding therefore, that old age is associated with God's favour. And nothing else!

Thus, old age is a mark of status. There is nothing inherently problematic about growing old. And yet in most nations of the world, old age is increasingly understood in *'social problems'* terms. This informs some policies that are put in place for the aged. While there is nothing wrong with this, after all, the aged are still part of the living, what I take exception to is the philosophy behind it. And that is, keeping the aged in the Old People's Home for the belief that they now constitute a social and psychological discomfort to the vibrant citizens. As we all must age and eventually die, any social cultural belief system and perhaps so called economic wisdom that are inimical to the psychological well-being for those who reach the conclusion of life's natural sequences must eventually have to change. And not only that, the aging class must also change their mindset as well and I challenge them to take counsel in one of the sayings of Arnold Glasow, *'People must find aims in life before they run out of ammunition'*.

I think the fulcrum of this lecture is not entirely for the aged, but also for the young and strong on how to take care of the aged.

The reason is simple and that is at twenty, we worry about what others think of us; at forty we don't care about what others think of us, and at sixty and above, we discover that people have not been thinking about us at all. This though which in itself is irrational contributes and aids the senior citizens aging processes. What I am driving at is that other than the physiological and physiological "recesses" of the body system at a certain age, the irrational belief that old age is not pleasurable should be discontinued with. This more often than not, make difficulties (stress, strains, sickness, loneliness, phobia, senility, etc) run into the aged. What a paradox! In youth, we also run into those difficulties of anxiety, worry, and having to age quickly so that we can have independence.

What Ageing and Old Age is?

Ageing is a process of getting old. And more operationally in the context of this lecture, it is when the body begins to experience some dysfunctions physically and physiologically. Be that as it may, aging is not exclusive of the senior citizens. Aging sets in the very moment a neonate (new born child) is delivered. The concomitant erroneous notion is that aging is associated with old age. This is itself has constituted stress to aged. Every body must age. It is developmental and it is a sign that we are growing. The question then is: Why would what is programmed in man give him/her stress? The answer beckons immediately; it is the irrational thinking process.

Old age consists of ages nearing the average life span of human beings, and which eventually is the end of the human life cycle. Old age cannot be defined exactly because it does not have the same meaning in all societies. In many parts of the world people are considered old because of certain changes in their activities or social roles. For example, people may be considered old when they become grandparents, or when they begin to do less or different work.

In the United States of America, people are often considered old if they have lived a certain number of years. Many Americans think of 65 as the beginning of old age because United States workers become eligible to retire with full social security at age 65.

In Nigeria, as we all know, it is 60 years depending on how the individual joins the services of the State. Or think of it in another way, the type of work one does.

Those in academia and judiciary 'enjoy' longer year of service.

Worldwide, the number of people 60 and 65 or older is increasing than ever before. This is as a result of some factors which include: improved health care facilities, improved nutrition, social security and pension scheme, early plan for one's life, and exercise. In developing countries, life expectancy is far less. It is also has to do with induced stressors like bad economy, no adequate pension scheme, lack of social policies.

From the above perspective, old age is operationally a period in which an individual retires from an active life of activities. It is a period of reflection on the life one has lived. And more importantly, it is a period the young generation is expected to draw from the fountain of wisdom of the elderly. And naturally too, the senior citizens are expected to give wisdom to the, young generation. The Psalmist says in selection 71 verse 81 that *"Now also when I am old and grey headed, O God forsake me not; until I have showed thy strenght unto this generation, and thy power to everyone that is to come"* The book of Job Chapter 12, verse 12 also says that *with the ancient is wisdom and in length of days understanding.*

Symptoms of Old Age

When old age creeps in, there are manifested symptoms. These include: grey hair, wrinkle body, loss of hearing, loss of vision, senility, among others. While these can as well be observed in children, youths and middle-aged people, they are more often associated with the aged.

What makes Old Age Stressful

By any means, every normal human being desires old age. Man longs for it. Paradoxically

however, what man longs for scares man. At this period, there is increasingly high risks of morbidity, disability, chronic diseases, and functional impairments, which impinge upon the day-to-day routines, and life satisfaction of the oldest (Manton & Soldo, 1992; Smith, Borchelt, Maier, & Jopp, 2002).

Loneliness is highly associated with old age. And this is obvious in that younger generation feels that the elderly are no longer current. They refer to them as “Old School”. This also leads to depression on the part of the aged. The aged are socially isolated, economically unviable and dependent. And in the contemporary time, they are also considered too old, and too unrelated to the current religious happenings in their society. All these, will cumulatively lead to depression, which if care is not taking could lead to conscious and unconscious suicide. As a matter of fact, depression has a powerful negative impact on ability to function, resulting in high rates of disability and dis-functionality.

One other stressor associated with being old in age has to do with civilization and technology. The world is dynamic and the aged are static. And being unable to meet up with the dynamism and fast pace of the world’s civilization and technology further compound the ‘woes’ of the elderly people. Why? we should remember that they are still living and still need our attention. Incidentally, their psychology and interest are not accommodated in the fast-paced schemes of the world. And they are labeled as I earlier remarked as “Old School”.

Care giving at old age most times does not conform to the expectations of the aged. While in Nigeria, and most especially in the Yoruba culture, it is an anathema to have a secluded place for the aged (Old People’s Home) as we have in the Western world, the fact still remains that most aged do not have a full compliment of care (social, psychological, financial, spiritual etc) expected or their children, extended family members, and the society. Children are not only in a hurry when they visit; such visits are rare, and done most often when there are socials to attend in their villages.

Sickness, which is also associated with old age, also is a stressor to the aged. At this period of life, it is normal for our bodies to become dysfunctional and incapacitated. While these themselves are normal, irrational thoughts of such sickness and their effects on the psychological well-being of the aged produce stressors in form of frustration, regrets, annoyance, aggression and withdrawal symptoms (e.g. not talking about the sickness, pretence of all-is-well with my habit, social seclusion etc).

Behaviour tantrums are also associated with old age. These have to do with irrational behaviours. At this period of life, the aged “degenerate” to infants and would not only behave like infants, they sometime “constitute” a form of stress to their caregivers. It is not they, but the developmental phenomena in them. This, we also have to understand.

Regrets of past life are another form of stress that is associate with old age in some people.

Honestly old age is meant to be enjoyed, cherished, and floundered. For some, it 'is a total regret and absolutely frustrating. Such frustrated ageds are left to bear their own crosses and linger on in perpetual 'agonizing' living. Nothing could be more harrowing in old age.

Psychological Management of Old Age

Old age most especially when it is more advanced requires assistance not only from professionals but also from significant others in the lives of the aged. With this in mind, and with the focus of making: aging less stressful, it is imperative at this point of this lecture, to provide some psychological tips of managing old age. These are as follows:

Old age creeps in on a person like a thief the night. In view of this, people should be made psychologically ready for old age. How? This can be done by making them to believe that it is a developmental phase of life that must come if one is so opportune by the Almighty God. This is what is referred to as cognitive restructuring. Here, all the irrational thoughts associated with old age can be made to give way for good and reinforcing thoughts on all what old age is all about. For instance, old people can be made to believe that aging is graceful and divine. The Bible say in the first Chronicles chapter **29**, verse 28 that a good old age is full of days, riches and honour.

Anxiety Management: Through this, the aged can be helped by Managing their anxiety. Let them know that they have come thus far in life, and they can't afford to hasten their death by being anxious. In fact, the Holy Bible, rightly admonishes us that we can add cubic to our life span by being anxious.

Social Support: Africans are good at this. The only problem here is that rendering social support in Africa, people tend to do it by crying more than the bereaved. The aged do not need to be given love and attention as well and make them to have sense of belonging and relevance not only in the happenings around them but also what goes on in other places. In so doing, they feel loved, relevant and not distant socially.

Communication: As earlier observed in this paper, of the stressors confronting the aged is loneliness. The understanding therefore is that helping the aged to age gracefully will also require of significant others to open constant line of communication with them. Talking out is not only therapeutic, it promotes adjustment of a true, the younger generation may find communicating with the aged uninteresting bored and unfruitful, the fact remains that they cannot be so isolated communication wise. Doing so will not only make them to be depressed and contemplate suicide, it could also make them to regret old age.

Communication with the aged can be both verbal and non-verbal. Verbal by engaging them in things of interest when on a visit to them; keep their company by asking them to relieve their early years or stories of their communities; and telephone calls. And non-verbal through body contact and body hug.

Other than the above, the aged themselves can be helped to cope successfully with old age.

The Psalmist says in selection 71, verse 90 “Cast me *not off in the time of old age, forsake me not when my strength faileth*”. And for strength not to be failed, I propose that our senior citizens should do the following:

* **Keep themselves clean:** The old saying by Benjamin Franklin, “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” gets truer as one ages. To be unkempt is the surest way to hasten the problem of old age.

* **Regular and moderate physical exercise:** Older people are often sedentary and have problems with exercise and activity. However, to stay alive and healthy; exercise is not a choice, but a necessity.

* **Eat less, but be sure the Food is well balanced and nutritional:** There is nothing better than fresh vegetables. The older we get, the less we eat for pleasure and the more we eat for survival.

* **Eliminate bad habit:** It is never too late to stop those bad habits that are injurious to our health.

* Go places, if possible: Through this, the aged will unwind themselves and feel easy psychologically. Besides, it will enhance their mental well-being.

* **Write letters to relative and friends:** An old song goes, “Make new friends, but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold”. As much as possible, I enjoin the aged not to lose track of their relatives and old friends. You do not only need them sweet memories as psychological investment that would yield dividends of emotional stability, appropriate mental health, social

well-being and spiritual challenge, doing so will also keep you mentally and psychologically alert.

* **Play Games and enjoy Sports:** The aged should learn how to play social games.

* **Monitor your attitudes by keeping a daily Journal:** There are certain mental and emotional attitudes that keep the senior citizens low. To avoid this, I recommend as follows:

1. **Be Emotionally Intelligent:** This requires you to understand your emotions, emotions in others and appropriately self-regulate your emotions. Give yourself a daily grade on temperament and strive to improve through daily monitoring.

2. **A void being pessimistic:** At this period of life, you are not only experienced, you have seen it all. What is it again that will destabilize your psycho-emotional

composition?

3. **Keep your Spiritual Life Intact:** More than ever before, you have more business of prayer to transact with God at least for the sake of your children and grandchildren.
4. **Speak a good word and do a good Deed:** No matter the precipitating events, do not curse for is weighty. Instead, let soothing words and admonition proceed from your mouth.
5. **Fight off death to the very end:** Genesis 6:3 “And the Lord said, ‘My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh, yet his days shall be 120 years”.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, you have come along With me for a while now in this lecture. And you must have come to two main conclusions:

Ageing could be graceful and could be harrowing. Whatever, it is I have provided some antidotes of promoting the former and managing the latter. You know why, James Barrce says “Life is half spent before we know ‘What it is.” On note, I challenge our senior citizens to age gracefully. They can't afford less. They must enjoy to the full the remaining years of their lives while it last. And I pray it lasts longer. And for the middle-aged and perhaps the youth, let us accord the aged more respect, honour and support. And we can also not afford to do less, because it is a voyage we hope to navigate when our time comes. And may we be well prepared for it and navigate well in our own time.

And what's more, I thank you for listening very well to this message from an emerging middle aged man who is gradually getting to the peak of yearning for more knowledge, The Psalmist says in selection 19 verses 2 to 3 “Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. If by the context of this lecture, I have done the above, then let all glory be ascribed to God who I also pray to grant me old age in sound health like these envied aged.

Thanks and God bless.