

**Aging and Mental Health: The Complexities of Positive Well-being**

by

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### **Abstract**

This capstone aimed to enhance the reader's comprehension of the aging process, and the complexities involved in maintaining positive subjective well-being, shedding light on the perspective of older adults and elucidating the varying degrees of mental health. Aging does not inherently lead to unhappiness; many older adults experience positive well-being, indicating a complex relationship between aging and emotional health. The capstone delved into the multifaceted nature of aging, with a focus on the role of Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and its components, including positive affect, emotional profiles, and emotional regulation.

Additionally, best practices for counsellors working with older adults are highlighted, along with recommendations for future research in this field, emphasizing the promotion of mental well-being during the aging process. The discussion in this capstone provides a deeper understanding of potential applications and considerations, offering valuable insights for mental health professionals, researchers, and practitioners in the field of counselling.

*Keywords: mental health, subjective well-being, aging, older adults, paradox, emotional profiles*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Topic Overview

Approximately 14% of adults aged 60 and older experience a mental health disorder. According to the *Global Health Estimates (2019)*, these conditions account for 10.6% of the total disability among older adults. Globally, around a quarter of deaths from suicide (27.2%) are among people aged 60 or over. Canadian seniors report higher levels of emotional distress compared to their counterparts in many other countries. In 2022, 18% of Canadian seniors experienced emotional distress, such as anxiety or deep sadness, that they struggled to manage on their own, while 13% were diagnosed with depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions by a doctor (Commonwealth Fund, 2022). Among those who faced emotional distress, 35% sought and received professional help, while 34% chose not to seek any professional support (Commonwealth Fund, 2022). These numbers are likely higher because of the number of seniors who may not have participated in the study or did not want to disclose emotional hardships.

Looking ahead, the Government of Canada (2024) estimates that by 2038, there will be about 40 seniors for every 100 Canadian adults aged 18 to 64. Despite the higher-than-expected prevalence of mental health conditions among older adults and the growing number of seniors, these issues are often underrecognized and undertreated. While many people associate aging with declining happiness due to the burdens of advancing age and the proximity of death, old age doesn't necessarily equate to unhappiness. What accounts for older adults who maintain a sense of positive well-being despite facing such challenges? Aging is a complex, multidimensional process shaped by various factors, including subjective well-being, emotional regulation, and the cultivation of positive affect. This capstone will explore the various dimensions and perspectives

of aging, shedding light on both the challenges and the positive experiences that can emerge in later life.

### **Purpose Statements**

The capstone aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects of aging and its effect on mental health. In the past, there have been many theories that suggest how one might experience the process of growing old, with Subjective Well-Being (SWB) being frequently used as a measure. I want to explore how positive SWB can help those who are aging withstand cognitive decline, physical deterioration, as well as low social support. It's important to note that SWB represents life satisfaction and is acceptable to be acknowledged when researching aging, although there are so many different aspects and dynamics that need to be considered when it comes to the overall well-being of those who are growing old. The components of SWB are not independent but rather coexist with many variables like positive affect, attitude towards aging, and emotional profiles. The purpose is to investigate the impact of aging on mental health and subjective well-being in older adults and analyze how maintaining positive well-being can help mitigate challenges such as cognitive decline and diminished social support.

### **Contribution to the Field**

There exists a need to explore and research the older population to deepen the counselling profession's understanding of its impact on what this natural process of aging does to an individual's mental health. Most people will experience old age in their lifetime or have someone close to them who is experiencing it. In counselling, it seems very likely that mental health practitioners will have to come across the topic of aging, regardless of their focus or area of expertise. Millennial counsellors in training (CITs) often had a limited understanding of

counselling older adults, which was heavily influenced by their interactions with aging family members (Santiago, 2013). This personal experience shaped their perceptions of aging and contributed to their sense that they needed more foundational knowledge about the mental health needs of older adults. Although many CITs showed a preference for counselling younger clients and felt unprepared to work with older adults, they still expressed a desire for every older adult in need to have access to a competent counsellor (Santiago, 2013). Despite this, the majority of CITs felt discomfort when discussing aging, particularly when asked to reflect on their own aging. Santiago (2013) states that the subject's reliance on their experiences with aging family members may have narrowed their perception of aging and limited their awareness of the diversity and complexities that come with it. A significant source of tension for CITs was realizing they would likely work with an older demographic, regardless of their specialization, and feeling unprepared for this reality (Santiago, 2013). This discomfort highlighted the need for more gerontological education in our training to become counsellors, though we sometimes face structural obstacles in gaining this knowledge. Most CITs in the study recognized that dealing with older clients would become an inevitable part of their careers, particularly as their own family members age, leading to a significant revelation about their professional futures (Santiago, 2013). This seems to be a genuine obstacle for upcoming therapists, therefore, formulating suitable and practical interventions to address these issues are important.

Furthermore, there appears to be a significant disparity in the utilization of therapy between older adults aged 65 and above and younger adults under the age of 65. The younger generation's increased receptiveness to counselling can be attributed to several factors, including evolving societal norms, greater awareness, and changing attitudes toward mental health. In recent decades, there has been a cultural shift that encourages open discussions about emotional

struggles, anxiety, and depression, which were often taboo topics for older generations (Nair et al., 2020). Younger individuals seem to have grown up in environments where therapy and counselling are widely accepted as normal, healthy responses to life's challenges. Schools and universities often provide mental health resources, and many young people are introduced to counselling early, whether through school programs or online resources like mental health apps. Additionally, social media platforms have played a significant role in breaking down the stigma around therapy (Nair et al., 2020). Influencers and public figures often speak candidly about their mental health journeys, making counselling more relatable and accessible. It can be inferred that younger people are more likely to embrace the idea that mental health care is as important as physical health care, making counselling a natural choice when dealing with stress, anxiety, or other emotional concerns. In contrast, older adults may have been socialized in a time when discussing mental health was considered a sign of weakness, or therapy was viewed as only necessary in extreme cases (Nair et al., 2020). As a result, they may be more hesitant to seek help, often preferring to manage issues on their own or dismissing emotional struggles as a natural part of life, often adopting social explanations for the condition (Givens et al., 2006). As a result, conventional treatments like antidepressants or psychological therapies may not align with their beliefs about mental health (Nair et al., 2020). According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2024), as many as one in three seniors living independently report a need for mental health care. Diagnostic delays become more common with age, exacerbating these challenges (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2024). In one study, 22% of older adults screened positive for depression, yet only 5% accessed health services for mood or anxiety disorders, highlighting a gap in mental health care utilization within this population (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2024). The generational differences in attitudes toward

counselling may account for the greater openness observed among younger individuals, who tend to perceive it as a valuable resource for personal development and well-being. In contrast, older adults often exhibit greater reluctance or uncertainty regarding participation in such services. From an intersectional perspective, it is essential to foster awareness and create a supportive space for clients over the age of 65 to explore the complexities of the aging process within the counselling setting. Facilitating such discussions can enhance our understanding and contribute to promoting their journey toward positive mental health. As counsellors, it is equally important to critically reflect on and challenge both personal and professional values that may influence our practice. It is also important for counsellors to recognize that individual's values are often shaped by dominant and conventional beliefs prevalent in their milieu and society, including ageist norms and ideology. Additionally, counsellors should understand the cultural context in which the client lives and how that could intersect with age, education, culture, neurodivergence, and socioeconomic status, amongst other things.

### **Positional Statement**

I selected this research topic due to its relevance to my career aspirations in counselling and my inherent curiosity regarding the subject matter. My professional experience to date has primarily involved working with adolescents; consequently, I seek to broaden my understanding of various age groups that I may encounter in my future practice as a mental health therapist. It is important to acknowledge that I am writing this paper as an able-bodied woman of colour from a Southeast Asian background, thereby framing my perspective through an intersectional lens. While I have some personal experiences with aging, they do not extend to the physical or cognitive declines nor the full emotional complexities that often accompany this stage. However,

I have witnessed these challenges through family members who are currently navigating, or have previously navigated, this phase of life. Witnessing these events firsthand has ignited numerous questions and a strong desire to further explore the topic.

My Southeast Asian background has led me to recognize that my cultures conditioning often encourages a passive response to problems. In this context, being emotionally affected is frequently perceived as a sign of weakness, resulting in a tendency to regulate emotions internally by refraining from communication and withdrawing from social interactions. Conversely, having spent a significant portion of my life immersed in Western culture, I have developed a contrasting perspective that values open communication, mental health awareness, healthy emotional expression, and the importance of connecting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This cultural duality has prompted me to reflect on my grandmother's well-being during her illness. While we often engage in discussions about physical health, I find myself questioning the state of her mental health. Is she truly content? Does she experience fear? How can we best support her in the time we have remaining together? Unfortunately, these inquiries often remain unvoiced. I am increasingly aware that cultural background and generational context significantly shape perceptions of aging and mental health. I aim to explore how contemporary literature addresses these factors in relation to aging, particularly as much of the existing research on subjective well-being (SWB) does not adequately answer these questions. As I conduct this research project, I must remain mindful of how my personal experiences, background, and perspectives may influence my interpretation of the current literature.

### **Definition of Terms**

### ***Attentional strategies***

Attentional strategies refer to techniques or methods used to direct and manage one's focus of attention. In the context of emotions, it involves directing focus to manage and influence emotional experiences. These strategies help individuals control their emotional responses by choosing what to pay attention to or how to interpret emotional stimuli, i.e., older adults have higher levels of well-being, so they tend to pay more attention to information that aligns with their current emotional state. (Charles, 2010).

### ***Emotional Profile***

Refers to the diverse emotional variables that will be experienced by specifically the older generation – in this capstone. It is the emotions present based on a detailed description or analysis of a person's emotional tendencies, patterns, and responses. This includes how individuals typically experience and express emotions, their emotional strengths and challenges, and how their emotions impact their behaviour and interactions (Etxeberria et al., 2018).

### ***Emotional Regulation***

Emotional regulation involves an individual's capacity to adjust their emotional experiences. Explicit regulation requires active, conscious efforts, such as reinterpreting situations to handle them more effectively, redirecting emotions like anger to achieve better results, and understanding how various actions can influence specific emotional states. On the other hand, implicit regulation works automatically, adjusting the strength or duration of an emotional response without conscious awareness. Generally, the ability to regulate emotions tends to improve as people age (APA, 2018)

### ***Older Adults***

Older adults or individuals in this capstone refers to seniors 65 and over. The terms will be used interchangeably. On the other hand, younger adults describe individuals under the age of 65

### ***Paradox***

A paradox is a statement or idea that seems contradictory or against common sense but upon further reflection, may reveal a hidden truth. Paradoxes often challenge conventional logic and can reveal deeper insights or complexities within a concept (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

### ***Resilient***

Older adults in the resilient group maintain emotional balance, experiencing low levels of both positive and negative emotions. They demonstrate adaptability by utilizing passive coping strategies, such as accepting, suppressing, or redirecting difficult emotions like sadness or anger, allowing them to stay focused on the bigger picture. This approach helps them maintain emotional stability, assess their lives positively, and achieve moderate life satisfaction. Although seniors in the “resilient” group may still experience some loneliness, they successfully adjust to the changes that come with aging. Their ability to adapt and stay emotionally grounded, even without confronting every challenge head-on, highlights their strength and emotional resilience (Etxeberria et al., 2018).

### ***Subjective Well-Being (SWB)***

Subjective well-being (SWB) is the evaluation a person makes about their own happiness and overall life satisfaction. It encompasses both emotional reactions and cognitive judgments about life. Typically, subjective well-being is broken down into two key components: ***affective well-being*** (the balance between positive and negative emotions) and ***cognitive well-being*** (a person’s overall evaluation of their life satisfaction). Unlike objective measures of well-being

(like income or health), SWB is based on personal feelings and perceptions, making it a subjective measure of how individuals feel about their lives (Diener, 1984).

### **Outline of Chapters**

Chapter One offers a concise introduction and overview of the importance of exploring the diverse aspects of aging and their impact on mental health. This exploration is particularly valuable given the limited understanding of counselling for older adults, often attributed to generational differences in attitudes toward mental health services. The chapter also presents a positional statement and defines key terms to enhance conceptual clarity. Overall, it provides the rationale for the study and outlines the research aims and objectives.

Chapter Two provides a systematic review of the existing literature on the aging process and its impact on mental health, highlighting both the strengths and challenges associated with growing older. Subjective well-being is introduced as a valuable construct for evaluating individuals' happiness and perceptions of their quality of life. The chapter further explores the paradox of maintaining subjective well-being despite the increased risks and losses that often accompany aging. Additionally, this chapter examines a broader range of factors to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the aging process. Given the diverse ways individuals experience aging, adopting a multidimensional approach will yield deeper insights into effectively supporting older adults during this life stage. This exploration also aims to inform the development of targeted interventions to enhance their mental health and overall well-being.

Chapter Three examines the theoretical and practical implications of the research, identifies barriers and limitations, and proposes directions for future studies in the field of counselling for older adults. It emphasizes the importance of expanding therapists' understanding of the aging process and enhancing counselling services tailored to this demographic.

Additionally, this chapter serves as the conclusion by synthesizing the key findings and offering reflections for both the author and practicing therapists, with the aim of fostering more effective practices in the support of older adults.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 2 will first delve into Subjective well-being (SWB) and how it relates to aging. SWB is closely tied to how individuals experience aging, influencing both mental health and quality of life in older adults (Liu et al., 2023). SWB encompasses emotional experiences (such as happiness and life satisfaction) and cognitive assessments of life (Liu et al., 2023). As people age, maintaining positive well-being can buffer against challenges such as cognitive decline, loneliness, and health deterioration (Liu et al., 2023). A paradox exists suggesting that high levels of subjective well-being can be maintained even in the face of challenges like cognitive decline, physical deterioration, and reduced social support. (Gana et al., 2015). A few theories that explain this phenomenon will be explored.

Chapter Two further explores the relationship between aging and well-being across several key dimensions. Luhmann et al. (2012) distinguish subjective well-being (SWB) into two components: cognitive well-being, which reflects life satisfaction, and affective well-being, which involves positive and negative emotional experiences. Their research highlights that major life events impact these dimensions differently, warranting independent examination. Similarly, Etxeberria et al. (2018) identify three recurring emotional profiles among older adults—happy, resilient, and dissatisfied—indicating that well-being in later life does not decline uniformly but instead follows diverse emotional trajectories. Perceptions of health also play a pivotal role, as poor self-assessed health is associated with negative attitudes toward aging and heightened

vulnerability to depression (Liu et al., 2021). Furthermore, the loss of autonomy resulting from functional disabilities can intensify feelings of helplessness, as observed by Yang (2006), whereas maintaining independence is essential for sustaining quality of life. Cultural values also shape the aging experience, with certain societies venerating older adults for their wisdom and providing them with elevated social status and familial support (Giles et al., 2003). The chapter also examines the components of positive aging, focusing on how older adults derive meaning and purpose in their lives and demonstrate adaptability in response to challenges. Collectively, these perspectives highlight the multifaceted nature of aging and emphasize the interplay between individual, social, and cultural factors in shaping well-being in later life.

### **Subjective Well-Being**

Historically, numerous theories have sought to explain the psychological and biological dimensions of the aging process. Subjective well-being, a self-reported measure grounded in personal life experiences and other specific domains, is frequently employed in aging research (Stone & Mackie, 2013). Well-being—also referred to as wellness, prudential value, prosperity, happiness, or quality of life—encompasses what an individual perceives as inherently valuable. It represents what is genuinely beneficial to the person, aligning with their self-interest and contributing to overall life satisfaction (Roger, 2017). Understanding the relationship between SWB of older adults and its relationship with quality of life is imperative. Correlational analyses demonstrate a positive association, indicating that individuals with a higher quality of life exhibit greater SWB, resulting in emotional stability and psychological well-being (Liu et al., 2023). Conversely, a strong quality of life is linked to reduced negative emotions and higher life satisfaction, further reinforcing SWB (Liu et al., 2023). Addressing the specific physical and

psychological needs of older adults is essential for fostering an accurate self-assessment of their quality of life and enhancing their well-being. (Liu et al., 2023).

Psychological studies have confirmed the reliability and validity of SWB measures, indicating that they accurately reflect what they are intended to measure. When examining the consistency of various cognitive, affective, and SWB questions in repeated tests over a two-week period, the results show that the correlations are likely robust enough to support much of the ongoing research on subjective well-being, especially when comparing group averages (e.g., between rich and poor, or employed and unemployed) where statistical aggregation offers additional benefits (Krueger & Schkade, 2007). Among the most studied topics are the relationships between happiness and income, happiness and health, and happiness within social contexts, with marriage and divorce being particularly significant factors (Binder & Coad, 2013). Additionally, the impact of unemployment on happiness has been extensively researched (Binder & Coad, 2013). Personality traits, categorized as individual determinants, have also been recognized in the psychological literature as equally significant in determining subjective well-being as sociodemographic variables (Binder & Coad, 2013).

An individual's SWB or 'happiness' is influenced by a complex network of factors. Research exploring these relationships has grown significantly in recent years, although not particularly in conjunction with aging. Some of those could include internal causes such as temperament and resiliency but can also include more bottom-up influences like social connections, material conditions, or socio-demographics. This literature review aims to provide a better understanding of the various aspects of aging and its effect on mental health for the elderly population. Synthesizing findings from research studies will offer a comprehensive view of how aging affects the psychological well-being of older individuals and help practitioners provide the

best support. The following will first focus on studies that explain SWB and the paradox that has emerged. Subsequently, variables that may coexist with SWB will be explored to provide us with a thorough perspective of the intricate dynamics of aging. Finally, limitations and ethical considerations for future practice will also be considered.

### **The Aging Paradox**

At first glance, the combination of advancing age, health decline, increased risks, and various losses may seem to hinder the ability to maintain a positive outlook on well-being. However, research presents a paradox, indicating that positive subjective well-being (SWB) can endure despite challenges such as cognitive decline, physical deterioration, and limited social support (Gana et al., 2015). While it is often assumed that aging correlates with a decline in quality of life, evidence demonstrates that many older adults continue to report stable or even elevated levels of well-being. This suggests that the relationship between aging, losses, and SWB is far more intricate than previously anticipated.

A few theories have tried to explain the phenomenon, with one being the “selective optimization with compensation”. It proposes that Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) is a model of optimal resource usage exercised by aging individuals to maintain their life satisfaction (Jopp & Smith, 2006). This could look like restructuring a goal hierarchy, being persistent about a task, or using alternate external means such as assistive devices (Jopp & Smith, 2006). The SOC literature by Baltes and Baltes (1990) identifies two types of Selection: 'loss-based selection,' which involves the involuntary abandonment of certain goals or tasks, and 'elective selection,' where tasks or goals are voluntarily chosen or prioritized based on personal motives and preferences. 'Optimization' refers to the allocation of resources, such as training or skill acquisition, to achieve goals or complete tasks. Lastly, 'Compensation' involves using

alternative strategies or external resources to accomplish goals or solve tasks. These strategies aim to maximize gains and minimize losses associated with aging, thereby promoting successful development and aging (Karlsen et al., 2022). However, the SOC framework is not limited to aging; it is a life-span model of successful development that can be applied across various life stages and domains (Karlsen et al., 2022). Wiese et al. (2000) were able to explore the application of SOC strategies in the workplace, and over the past two decades, organizational scholars have highlighted the benefits of using the SOC model in work settings. Research has shown that SOC strategies positively impact both individual employees and organizations, leading to outcomes such as the maintenance of professional competencies, a belief in future job opportunities, job satisfaction, improved workability, and overall well-being.

The hedonic treadmill theory explains why individuals are able to maintain a relatively stable level of happiness despite changes in their circumstances during aging. The theory is grounded in a model of automatic habituation, where psychological systems adapt to deviations from one's typical level of adaptation (Diener et al., 2009). These habituation processes are beneficial because they allow constant stimuli to fade into the background, freeing up resources to handle new stimuli that may require immediate attention (Diener et al., 2009). This concept, formalized by Carver and Scheier (1990), suggests that emotions are more influenced by the rate at which important circumstances change than by the overall desirability of those circumstances. Brickman et al. (1978) conducted a study that encompassed the theory and gave it empirical support. The authors concluded that lottery winners do not exhibit significantly greater happiness compared to non-winners, and individuals with paraplegia do not experience substantially lower levels of happiness than those who are able to walk (Diener et al., 2009). A longitudinal study that monitored happiness over time following the experience of an undesirable life event, such as

a spinal cord injury, revealed that individuals experienced a considerable number of negative emotions during the initial week post-injury (Silver, 1982). However, two months later, happiness emerged as the predominant emotion (Silver, 1982). The appeal of the hedonic adaptation framework lies in its capacity to elucidate why individuals with substantial resources may not report higher levels of happiness than those with fewer resources, as well as why individuals facing significant challenges can nonetheless discover pathways to happiness.

The Strength and Vulnerability Integration (SAVI) model was introduced to explain emotional well-being across adulthood through psychosocial processes. It suggests that with age comes experience in the use of strategies that help avoid or mitigate exposure to negative stimuli and are hypothesized to respond better to vulnerable situations with behavioural strategies of emotional regulation (Charles, 2010). This model acknowledges both the strengths that accompanying aging are vulnerabilities that can make it more difficult to manage certain emotional experiences. By integrating these strengths and vulnerabilities, SAVI offers a comprehensive understanding of when emotional well-being improves with age, when it does not, and the mechanisms behind these predictable trajectories. Included in this approach are behaviours such as attentional strategies and appraisals to regulate their daily emotional experiences (Charles, 2010). These emotion regulation skills often help individuals reduce negative emotions and maintain or boost positive ones after facing minor frustrations or challenges (Charles, 2010). These strategies are used not only in the present but also when reflecting on past emotional experiences long after they have occurred (Charles, 2010). In a recent study guided by the SAVI model, Minton et al (2023) investigated how younger and older adults responded to a cognitive stressor and recovered from it, using repeated measures of both positive and negative emotions. The results indicated that both groups were negatively affected

by the stressor and experienced an initial improvement during recovery (Minton et al., 2023). However, older adults showed continued progress throughout the recovery period, in contrast to younger adults (Minton et al., 2023). These findings emphasize that while older adults are significantly impacted by stress, they demonstrate a remarkable capacity for recovery as older adults experienced nearly double the increase in pleasant emotions and a decrease in unpleasant emotions compared to younger adults (Minton et al., 2023). This improvement in emotional regulation explains why studies generally find higher levels of overall emotional well-being among older adults compared to younger and middle-aged individuals.

The “socioemotional selectivity theory” ties all of the theories mentioned together, as it insists that there is a change in perspective and realization. It suggests that everyone has a conscious or unconscious sense of how much time they have left, and this perspective is closely linked to age (Charles, 2010). When individuals perceive time as abundant, as is typical for younger adults in societies with longer life expectancies, their focus tends to be on gathering information. However, as people grow older and view time as more limited, emotional goals take precedence (Charles, 2010). According to socioemotional selectivity theory, the increased importance of emotions and the desire to preserve emotional well-being drive people to manage their emotions in order to maintain high levels of well-being (Charles, 2010). This could look like younger adults working towards attaining a future goal, whilst older adults focus more about living in the present. There is an emphasis on different things that is the future is vast and expansive versus the meaningful experiences of the present (Minton et al., 2023).

Numerous research studies have explored this paradox; however, it remains uncertain whether it is definitive and reliable in isolation. Subjective well-being (SWB) is an acceptable

construct to consider in aging research; nonetheless, a multitude of factors and dynamics must be taken into account to fully understand the overall well-being of aging individuals. Stone and Mackie (2013) indicate that the components of SWB are not independent but rather coexist with various variables, encompassing both real-time assessments of experiences and emotional states, as well as comprehensive evaluations of life. Consequently, subjective well-being (SWB) may often be presented ambiguously within research studies. For instance, the term "happiness" is frequently adapted to encompass both momentary assessments and overall life satisfaction (Stone & Mackie, 2013). Additionally, this construct sometimes overlooks the complexities that can coexist in various situations; for example, an individual experiencing suffering may still find moments of enjoyment, while someone facing significant stressors may report high overall life satisfaction (Stone & Mackie, 2013). A multifaceted approach that considers a range of aspects may prove more reliable than a narrow focus solely on SWB and its paradox. Given that individuals experience aging in diverse ways, a comprehensive examination can enhance our understanding of how to support them during this transitional phase and inform the development of effective interventions for well-being and mental health concerns. As such, I am now shifting my focus from a direct examination of life satisfaction to an exploration of broader measures of well-being.

### **Positive Affect**

Luhmann et al. (2012) propose two distinct types of subjective well-being (SWB) relevant to the examination of changes in happiness and life satisfaction. Cognitive well-being (CWB) pertains to the evaluative aspect of well-being, primarily focusing on life satisfaction, while affective well-being (AWB) encompasses the emotional dimension, characterized by

positive and negative affect. Following significant life events (e.g., marriage, retirement, bereavement), their study findings revealed that these events had distinct impacts on each component and should be considered separately (Luhmann et al., 2012). The influence of life events on CWB is generally more consistent across different samples compared to their effects on AWB (Luhmann et al., 2012). A possible reason for this is that AWB is more affected by variables such as personality, coping strategies, emotional regulation, and social support. These factors not only shape individual differences in habitual AWB levels but also play a role in how people react to and adapt to life events. Some life events affected both affective well-being (AWB) and cognitive well-being (CWB) in the same direction but with different intensities. For instance, bereavement had negative impacts on both AWB and CWB, though the effect was stronger on CWB (Luhmann et al., 2012). Other events influenced only one aspect of subjective well-being (SWB); for example, unemployment led to improvements in CWB but did not affect AWB (Luhmann et al., 2012). Childbirth, however, produced divergent effects: it initially boosted CWB, which then quickly declined, especially in relation to relationship satisfaction, while AWB initially decreased but improved in the months following childbirth (Luhmann et al., 2012). As a result, childbirth can lead to long-term increases in AWB but decreases in CWB. A similar pattern was observed for events like marriage, bereavement, reemployment, and retirement, where the effects on AWB were generally weaker than on CWB (Luhmann et al., 2012). To illustrate the differential manifestations of subjective well-being (SWB), consider the example of childbirth. Individuals may assess their lives more negatively than before due to a reduction in quality time spent with their partners; however, they may simultaneously experience heightened emotional well-being as a result of the joy brought by their new infant. Future research on subjective well-being should focus on identifying the key psychological and

methodological factors that contribute to individual differences in SWB. Furthermore, it should elucidate how these factors differentially impact affective well-being and cognitive well-being, as well as clarify the underlying mechanisms that account for these variations.

Gana et al. (2015) is aware of the SWB paradox and the many theories that have tried to explain how positive SWB is able to withstand physical and cognitive declines. They argue that the current literature on SWB is to a great extent based on only one dimension, which is life satisfaction. It is described that life satisfaction represents the cognitive dimension, and positive or negative moods from immediate experiences represents affection dimension (Gana et al., 2015). These two dimensions are separate from each other and can show different results based on the events or experiences of that individual (Gana et al., 2015). Therefore, SWB may not be able to generalize all aspects of well-being pertaining to age-related declines over the life span (Gana et al., 2015). Gana et al. (2013) insists that old age doesn't necessarily indicate unhappiness, though fewer people are happy as they advance in age due to the burdens of approaching death.

The authors sought to address this research gap by conducting a 22-year longitudinal study that examines changes in positive affect among older and very old adults. Their findings indicate a linear trend in positive affect until a notable decline is observed in late life (Gana et al., 2015). This suggests a clear decrease in happiness as individuals age. Moreover, Gana et al. (2015) found that individuals with a higher baseline age experienced a more rapid decline in positive affect over time. Additionally, a separate 22-year longitudinal study involving individuals aged 70 to 100 revealed that variations in late-life changes in happiness were more effectively accounted for by proximity to death than by chronological age (Gerstorf, 2008). Notably, good self-perceived health emerged as a significant predictor of positive affect, as

health status can influence an older individual's ability to engage with their environment, thereby impacting their overall happiness. These insights underscore the importance of developing targeted interventions for this population, particularly by acknowledging the progressive changes in positive affect over time.

### **Emotional Profiles**

Etxeberria et al. (2018) states it is possible that well-being doesn't decline during old age, but there may be different emotional profiles that emerge. Their study aimed to explore this, as well as analyze the relationship between age and emotional profiles in participants between the age of 65 and 104. The results revealed that there are three profiles that consistently showed up, which are happy, resilient, and dissatisfied (Etxeberria et al., 2018). Happy was shown to be the most predominant profile, consisting of 55.71% of ages 65-74 and 58.97% of the 75-84 age group (Etxeberria et al., 2018). These individuals are characterized by optimal levels of positive affect and life satisfaction, alongside minimal experiences of loneliness and a limited reliance on passive strategies for regulating emotions such as sadness or anger (Etxeberria et al., 2018). According to Etxeberria et al. (2018), individuals within this "happy" category likely adopt a more optimistic perspective on life and have developed an appreciation for their new roles, responsibilities, leisure activities, and the wisdom gained through experience.

Resilient on the other hand was the most common profile for those who were over the age of 85, with 66.15% falling into the age group of 85-94 years and 82.14% for those who have reached 100 years (Etxeberria et al., 2018). Individuals classified within the resilient group exhibited both low levels of positive and negative affect, coupled with moderate levels of loneliness (Etxeberria et al., 2018). Furthermore, this group demonstrated a tendency to engage in more passive strategies for emotional regulation (Etxeberria et al., 2018). This distinction is

noteworthy, as members of the happy group were more proactive in their emotional regulation, suggesting implications for interventions aimed at older adults. The findings from the resilient group appear to support the subjective well-being (SWB) paradox, revealing no significant declines in their overall well-being.

Finally, the dissatisfied group was found to scatter across all age groups but consisted mostly in 7.69% of the age group 85-94, and 3.57% of those who are over 100 years old (Etxeberria et al., 2018). This group is characterized by low life satisfaction, elevated levels of negative affect, and heightened feelings of loneliness (Etxeberria et al., 2018). Furthermore, the results indicate a tendency to employ problem-solving strategies for the regulation of sadness and anger (Etxeberria et al., 2018). This suggests a potential connection whereby efforts to combat negative emotions may be counterproductive, particularly when the irreversible effects of aging are considered. Etxeberria et al. (2018) argue that passive strategies for emotional regulation may prove advantageous for individuals with limited resources. Collectively, these findings underscore the significant impact of age on emotional profiles and highlight the dual nature of emotional regulation strategies, which can either promote well-being or contribute to maladaptive outcomes.

Futhermore, when asked to vividly recall past emotional experiences, older adults demonstrate the same ability to do so as younger adults, showing comparable levels of emotional intensity and expression (Gross et al., 1997). Older age is frequently characterized as a period marked by declining abilities; however, in the context of emotional regulation, aging appears to facilitate comparable or even enhanced improvements rather than losses. Research indicates that older adults consistently report superior emotional control in comparison to their younger counterparts (Gross et al., 1997). This enhanced emotional regulation enables older individuals

to selectively amplify positive emotions while diminishing the intensity of negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, and fear. As a result, older adults can effectively alter the timing and manner in which they experience and express these emotions (Gross et al., 1997). These findings imply that older adults may exhibit a greater proficiency in specific aspects of emotion regulation relative to younger individuals, or at the very least, demonstrate a heightened ability to align their emotional regulation strategies with the demands of their environments and interpersonal contexts.

### **Perceived Health**

This study by Liu et al. (2021) aimed to look at perceived health status and depression, as well as its connection to attitudes of aging and levels of social support in older adults.

Depression affects over 7% of the world's elderly population, which aggravates physical health even further (Liu et al., 2021). Mental and physical health are interconnected, highlighting the importance of understanding the various mechanisms and potential mediators or moderators that influence this relationship. An individual's attitude toward aging reflects their perceptions and feelings about the aging process (Liu et al., 2021). Research indicates that when older adults perceive their health as poor, it is associated with increased negative attitudes toward aging, which in turn heightens the likelihood of depression (Liu et al., 2021). Furthermore, individuals who maintain a more positive attitude toward aging are more likely to engage in preventive health behaviours (Liu et al., 2021). Conversely, negative attitudes toward aging are correlated with an elevated risk of mental health issues, such as depression, with some individuals erroneously perceiving these negative emotions as a normal aspect of the aging process (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, future interventions could focus on mitigating negative attitudes toward

aging or fostering more positive perspectives, potentially enhancing the overall mental health and well-being of older adults.

In this study, social support was conceptualized to encompass instrumental, emotional, and informational dimensions. The findings indicate that the direct influence of low perceived health status on depression is particularly pronounced among older adults, especially those lacking a robust social support system (Liu et al., 2021). Individuals with strong support networks tend to experience lower levels of depression in the face of the negative consequences associated with aging, compared to their counterparts who lack such support (Liu et al., 2021). It is noteworthy that while social support mitigated the adverse effects of aging, it did not serve as a moderating factor (Liu et al., 2021). This suggests that social support alone may not effectively address the stressful life events encountered by older adults. Consequently, future research should explore interventions and strategies that can assist older adults who possess limited social support in managing these challenges.

Ageing is as much a physiological and psychological process as a social one. Perceived health and attitudes towards aging isn't always influenced by one's own thoughts. These ideas could have come from various biological, social, and other external factors. Socially, perceived health is shaped by how individuals compare themselves to their peers, their attitudes towards aging, experiences of ageism, and how they believe society views them (Buedo-Guirado, 2021). Negative stereotypes of aging are widespread in many cultures, with the rising demand for cosmetic surgery potentially reflecting a desire to resist the aging process (Hicky et al., 2010). These societal attitudes inevitably influence people's views on aging. An article by Velaithan et al. (2024) took a closer look into the Self-Perception of aging (SPA) and how it relates to Quality of life (QoL). The findings from the studies suggest that a positive self-perception of aging

(SPA) is linked to improved QoL in older adults. In contrast, a negative view of aging was associated with reduced QoL in older Chinese adults with hypertension. A comparison between urban and rural hypertensive older adults showed that those in rural areas had poorer SPA and lower quality of life (QoL) were observed among rural older adults due to their lower expectations for aging, with socioeconomic disparities playing a role in these differences (Velaithan et al., 2024). SPA disparities are influenced by factors such as health status, socioeconomic conditions, societal views, and whether individuals live in urban or rural areas. To improve QoL for older adults, it is essential to address these disparities, particularly in socioeconomic status, and enhance both individual and societal perceptions of aging.

The first behavioural pathway suggests that older adults with a positive perception of aging are less likely to view health decline as inevitable, which makes them more likely to engage in physical activity to maintain their health (Velaithan et al., 2024). The second proposed mechanism operates through the psychological pathway, primarily involving self-efficacy or control beliefs. As self-efficacy is crucial for managing age-related challenges, having a more positive self-perception of aging (SPA) enhances self-efficacy, motivating individuals to stay active and use coping strategies to preserve their physical functioning (Velaithan et al., 2024). Positive SPA, along with a better attitude toward aging, improved knowledge about the aging process, an enhanced self-image, and feeling younger, is associated with higher life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2021). Conversely, negative SPA, negative age stereotypes, and passive acceptance of aging are linked to lower life satisfaction and diminished self-esteem (Chen et al., 2021). SPA plays a significant role in life satisfaction, as older adults with a more positive SPA tend to better adapt to the aging process. Negative perceptions of aging appear to contribute to a pessimistic outlook on the future, which can subsequently lead to increased levels of stress, depression, and

anxiety. Individuals exhibiting negative stereotypes about aging (SPA) are also less likely to seek mental health care, often viewing psychological distress as a normative aspect of the aging process (Freeman et al., 2016).

### **Functional Disabilities**

The loss of autonomy and independence resulting from functional disabilities can lead to significant alterations in an individual's lifestyle. Such functional incapacity and dependency are often correlated with feelings of helplessness and incompetence (Yang, 2006). Conversely, the preservation of independence is regarded as crucial for maintaining quality of life and is suggested to be a socially and culturally valued construct for older adults in the United States (Krause, 1987). The concept of a sense of control, or mastery, pertains to the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as influenced by their own actions rather than by external, uncontrollable forces (Yang, 2006). Many older adults experience a decline in personal control due to physical impairments and frequently encounter challenges that resist problem-solving efforts. Consequently, functional disabilities may interact with one's sense of control, exacerbating feelings of depression by undermining self-esteem or an individual's positive assessment of their self-worth (Yang, 2006). Research indicates that stressful life events can destabilize an individual's sense of identity, with such disruptions often leading to increased feelings of distress (Yang, 2006). In this framework, functional impairment is conceptualized as a stressful event that is intricately linked to the loss of personal identity associated with independence.

Functional impairment can lead to a significant reduction in social support, as limitations in mobility and difficulties managing daily life independently impede participation in social relationships and the fulfillment of social roles. Older adults with disabilities and poor physical

functioning often encounter restricted engagement in valued social activities, resulting in feelings of isolation from friends and family, and a tendency to withdraw from social interactions (Yang, 2006). This withdrawal culminates in a diminished quality of available social support and contributes to heightened perceptions of negative health or subjective well-being (SWB). Importantly, the mere presence or extent of functional impairment does not inherently result in depression. Rather, deficiencies in high-quality social relationships, a lack of control, and low morale also play significant roles in this relationship. Therefore, psychological interventions would benefit from simultaneously addressing the prevention of losses in these vital coping resources, thereby enhancing their overall effectiveness.

### **Cultural Considerations**

Cultural attitudes toward aging significantly influence the experiences and management of the aging process. Lawrie et al. (2020) argue that cultural differences affect the ways emotional well-being evolves with age, therefore it's important to consider cultural frameworks when examining the relationship between age and well-being across diverse societies. Their study explores the cultural dimension of *uncertainty avoidance*, a concept derived from Hofstede's influential cultural framework, which identifies six dimensions of cultural variability: individualism, power distance, masculinity, long-term orientation, indulgence, and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Cultural dimensions describe how societies address fundamental challenges, such as managing uncertainty or maintaining social hierarchies (Lawrie et al., 2020). Hofstede's framework offers valuable insights into the psychological tendencies that differ across cultures, providing a comparative basis for understanding how people navigate these challenges. The results support the hypothesis that uncertainty avoidance plays a significant role in explaining cultural variations in the relationship between age and subjective

well-being. Findings indicate that in countries with higher levels of uncertainty avoidance, older adults exhibit a more negative relationship between age and well-being (Lawrie et al., 2020). Additionally, within these cultures, age was not significantly associated with a sense of personal control despite the accumulation of life experiences, potentially diminishing well-being among older adults (Lawrie et al., 2020). In contrast, in societies characterized by lower uncertainty avoidance, older adults reported a stronger sense of control over their lives when compared to younger individuals (Lawrie et al., 2020). This moderation effect highlights the importance of cultural context in shaping the psychological experience of aging, with older adults in low uncertainty avoidance societies better equipped to maintain well-being over time, while those in high uncertainty avoidance societies may experience greater challenges in this regard.

The second study conducted by Lawrie et al. (2020) further substantiates cultural differences in the relationship between age and subjective well-being, demonstrating that age-related declines in well-being were observed to be high in Romania, a society characterized by high uncertainty avoidance. The discrepancy between the United States and Romania was explained by variations in the stress-coping strategies employed by older adults in these two contexts. In line with Study 1's findings—where individuals in low uncertainty avoidance cultures reported a stronger sense of control with age—older Americans increasingly relied on high-control coping strategies, such as problem-solving and proactive stress management while reducing their use of low-control strategies, such as avoidance (Lawrie et al., 2020). Conversely, Romanian participants did not exhibit comparable changes in coping patterns as they aged. The tendency of older Americans to adopt more active coping mechanisms may serve as a buffer against age-related declines in subjective well-being (Lawrie et al., 2020). These results highlight the significant role that cultural norms and coping strategies play in shaping psychological

resilience during aging, suggesting that the ability to engage in high-control strategies could be instrumental in preserving well-being in older adulthood. This underscores the importance of considering cultural frameworks when examining the relationship between aging, coping, and well-being.

Furthermore, cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping family structures, dynamics, and the nature of support systems available to older adults. These norms influence the expectations surrounding familial roles, caregiving responsibilities, and intergenerational relationships, thereby determining the type and extent of emotional, financial, and instrumental support that older individuals receive (Lu et al., 2021). In many cultures, it is common for extended families to cohabit or maintain close contact, thereby providing crucial support to older adults (Lu et al., 2021). This can manifest in various ways, including cohabitation with adult children who assume caregiving roles or regular family gatherings that offer social and emotional support. For instance, multigenerational households are prevalent in many Asian cultures (Lu et al., 2021). In contrast, numerous Western societies are witnessing a shift toward nuclear family structures and an increased reliance on formal care services, such as nursing homes and assisted living facilities (Lu et al., 2021). A study conducted by Lu et al. (2021) explores the association between child-parent dynamics and the multidimensional health of older adults in the U.S. and China, analyzing a sample of 6,641 participants aged 65 and older. Within this framework, Western culture emphasizes independence in child-parent relationships, whereas Chinese culture prioritizes interdependence between adult children and their elderly parents (Lu et al., 2021). The findings reveal that, in contrast to their Chinese counterparts, fewer older Americans co-resided with or lived in proximity to their children, experienced less frequent contact, and engaged in fewer financial transfers in either direction (Lu et al., 2021).

Furthermore, most variables related to child-parent relationships did not serve as significant predictors of health among older Americans (Lu et al., 2021). In contrast, a stronger child-parent bond was associated with reduced depressive symptoms and enhanced cognitive functioning among older Chinese adults (Lu et al., 2021). These results highlight significant cross-cultural differences in the impact of child-parent relationships on the health of older adults, suggesting that examining these dynamics through a cultural lens is essential for understanding their influence on the well-being of this population. Older adults who have less frequent contact with family members may experience a heightened sense of isolation, which can significantly impact their overall well-being, particularly in cultures that prioritize collective family support over individualism.

In Chinese society, filial responsibility is deeply rooted in cultural norms, emphasizing the significance of intergenerational obligations to ensure family continuity (Lin & Yi, 2019). This framework establishes a reciprocal dynamic, wherein parents are entrusted with raising their children, while adult children are morally obligated to care for their aging parents (Lin & Yi, 2019). However, this relationship extends beyond mere reciprocity, embodying ethical values essential to fostering familial cohesion. Filial norms not only underscore parents' duties toward their children but also reaffirm the adult children's role in supporting elderly family members, thereby sustaining familial stability across generations (Lin & Yi, 2019). In practice, adult children fulfill these obligations through co-residence with their parents or the provision of financial assistance (Lin & Yi, 2019). In contrast to the financial transfer patterns prevalent in Western societies, where older generations frequently provide financial support to younger ones, Chinese families typically demonstrate an upward flow of resources, with adult children assuming responsibility for supporting their elderly parents (Liu et al., 2020). These practices are

shaped by both cultural norms, particularly the tradition of filial piety, and the broader economic context (Liu et al., 2020). The limited access to pensions among many older Chinese adults further exacerbates their financial dependence on their children (Liu et al., 2020). Consequently, filial responsibility within Chinese culture places considerable emphasis on ensuring the financial stability of aging parents. This structure emphasizes the interconnected nature of extended families, reflecting the prioritization of collective well-being. Additionally, the results provide theoretical insights into the functioning of multigenerational relationships within the cultural framework of filial piety.

In numerous cultures, aging is regarded as a significant milestone, with older adults being esteemed for their accumulated wisdom and life experiences (Giles et al., 2003). This reverence often manifests as elevated social status and robust family support, positioning elders as central figures within familial and communal contexts. For example, in many Asian cultures, older individuals are honored, and their opinions are held in high regard, thereby reinforcing their role as key decision-makers (Giles et al., 2003). This phenomenon is influenced by Confucian values, such as filial piety and ancestor worship, which are believed to cultivate positive attitudes toward aging and foster a high regard for older adults (Giles et al., 2003). The respect and authority conferred upon older individuals, along with the esteem in which their decisions are held by younger family members, can significantly enhance their sense of control and agency. Conversely, in certain cultures, aging can be linked with decline and a loss of relevance, resulting in diminished social status, autonomy, and self-esteem, which can subsequently adversely affect the mental health of older individuals (Giles et al., 2003). In many Western societies, for instance, there tends to be an emphasis on youth and productivity, which can lead to the marginalization of older adults and negatively impact their self-esteem and levels of

societal engagement. Although the study by Giles et al. (2003) is somewhat dated, it remains relevant to understanding cultural perspectives on aging. A more recent journal article describes why these cultural values may still exist. Ayalon and Roy (2022) states that modernization is often associated with a decline in the status of older adults, driven by factors such as urbanization, advancements in education, economic transformations, and developments in health technologies. The rise of print media, technological innovations, and the migration of younger generations to urban centers has diminished the familial and economic roles traditionally held by older adults, rendering them less socially significant in many modern contexts (Ayalon & Roy, 2022). However, in the Western Pacific region, many countries remain in transition toward full industrialization, and long-standing cultural values continue to play a significant role (Ayalon & Roy, 2022). For example, South Korean individuals commonly ask strangers their age to ensure proper formalities are shown as their culture emphasizes respect for elders, with age being a crucial factor in social interactions (Ayalon & Roy, 2022). Other countries in the region, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and Mongolia, in which modernization is also incomplete, have deeply rooted cultural traditions of filial piety that persist (Ayalon & Roy, 2022).

Conversely, research over the years has highlighted inconsistencies in cultural perspectives on aging and older adults. Vauclair and Hanke (2016) sought to clarify the inconsistent findings regarding cultural differences in ageism between Eastern and Western societies. They distinguished between cultural norms, personal attitudes, and the various dimensions of ageism, such as stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Their research suggests that Eastern cultures may uphold more positive cultural norms regarding the status and value of older adults (Vauclair & Hanke, 2016). However, individuals' personal views do not always align with these cultural expectations. Differences in the findings can also depend on which

aspect of ageism is being assessed. For example, their study revealed that Taiwanese participants expressed more favourable perceptions of competence and admiration toward older adults compared to Western samples (Vauclair & Hanke, 2016). Nevertheless, in line with the typical stereotype of older adults, both Taiwanese and British participants reported seeing older adults as warmer than competent (Vauclair & Hanke, 2016). Additionally, feelings of envy and contempt toward older adults were more prevalent among Taiwanese participants (Vauclair & Hanke, 2016). These mixed results highlight the complexity of personal opinions and emotional responses toward older adults across cultures.

### **Aging Positively**

Aging research has traditionally prioritized the study of health decline, and the adverse aspects associated with growing older (Park et al., 2024). This focus has constrained the scope of inquiry, limiting a comprehensive understanding of aging from an integrative biopsychosocial perspective (Park et al., 2024). Consequently, the potential for positive aging experiences and the complex interconnections between biological, psychological, and social factors influencing well-being have been underexplored. A more holistic approach is necessary to capture the multidimensional nature of aging and to promote well-being across the lifespan. Both meaning and purpose in life are frequently discussed in the literature as interconnected constructs that significantly contribute to psychological well-being (Heinz et al., 2023). For instance, individuals with a greater sense of purpose tend to set meaningful goals, maintain life direction, and pursue activities that add value to their lives (Heinz et al., 2023). Research further emphasizes that purpose and meaning are essential components of successful aging, as they enable older adults to navigate challenges and stressors more effectively and exhibit greater resilience in the face of adversity, which promotes well-being in later life (Lee et al., 2022). The

perception of meaning and purpose evolves dynamically across the life span, shaped by various life events and role transitions. As individuals transition through different stages of life, they must continuously adapt to changing circumstances for both anticipated and unexpected challenges (Hupkens et al., 2016). For instance, while a career provides structure and purpose, retirement often necessitates active efforts to cultivate new sources of meaning. Hupkens et al. (2016) liken this process to the flow of a river, where individuals are required to adjust to environmental fluctuations. During some phases, meaning is readily accessible through reflection and appreciation, whereas other times demand greater effort to maintain or rediscover purpose. This capacity for adaptation plays a crucial role in sustaining well-being, particularly as individuals relinquish certain roles and forge new pathways to maintain purpose and engagement in later life (Hupkens et al., 2016).

A recent study by Heinz et al. (2023) sought to investigate how older adults derive meaning and purpose in their lives, as well as exhibit a capacity for adaptability. Research on the strategies that support positive aging and promote health and engagement among older adults often highlights several recurring themes, one of the most prominent being the practice of mindfulness, whether that be through awareness and preservation of nature, creative and artistic endeavours, or observing the changing world (Heinz et al., 2023). Participants engaged in various activities illustrating how mindfulness practices fostered meaning and purpose in their lives. Many emphasized the value of observing subtle seasonal transitions, reflecting on nature as a source of self-awareness and insight. Others extended these reflections into action by participating in conservation efforts or beautifying outdoor spaces, demonstrating their commitment to environmental stewardship (Heinz et al., 2023). Such actions not only enhanced their immediate surroundings but also deepened their sense of purpose through contributions to

the larger community. Engagement with nature also cultivated a heightened awareness of participants' connection to the broader world, underscoring their understanding of interdependence within ecological and social systems (Heinz et al., 2023). This connection takes on added significance as older adults navigate societal challenges associated with maintaining relevance in cultures that prioritize youth. To sustain their sense of belonging and purpose, many older adults adopt intentional and mindful practices, focusing on meaningful contributions to their communities (Heinz et al., 2023). Thus, mindfulness not only supports psychological well-being but also reinforces older adults' capacity to find purpose and maintain social integration within an evolving societal framework. In addition, several participants demonstrated creativity through artistic engagement, which facilitated deeper reflection on their surroundings and provided a means of emotional expression. For instance, Pamela [69 years old] described poetry as a way to process her thoughts, explore diverse perspectives, and articulate her emotions: “Poetry helps me face my thoughts and see the world and the people in it in many different ways and helps give voice to my feelings and emotions” (Heinz et al., 2023). Others reported similar experiences with creative practices, such as painting, drawing, and journaling. Elizabeth [69 years old], for example, highlighted journaling and drawing as activities that fostered mindfulness and self-awareness (Heinz et al., 2023). These findings emphasize that engaging in artistic activities contributes to older adults' sense of meaning and purpose by encouraging them to immerse themselves fully in the present moment. Such creative pursuits exemplify mindfulness by promoting focused attention and emotional regulation, which are critical components of well-being in later life (Heinz et al., 2023). One participant specifically highlighted feelings of “invisibility” during retirement, expressing that those creative activities offered a way to reaffirm their competence, value, and continued engagement in meaningful

pursuits. Furthermore, these artistic endeavours (e.g., paintings, photographs, and drawings) create tangible outputs of their creative work and serve as lasting representations of the purpose and meaning they have cultivated in their lives (Heinz et al., 2023). In this way, artistic engagement becomes not only a form of self-expression but also a mechanism for maintaining psychological health and reinforcing social and emotional connectedness.

Another recurring theme when it comes to positive aging is active participation in society through service to others, maintaining social relevancy, companionship, and through technology (Heinz et al., 2023). Participants in the study reported deriving purpose and fulfillment through meaningful engagement in activities that fostered social belonging and relevance (Heinz et al., 2023). Some focused on leaving a legacy, while others found personal gratification in serving others through volunteerism and caregiving. For example, Bernadette [66 years old] reflected on the emotional significance of caregiving, stating that caring for her mother after her father's death provided her life with a meaningful challenge (Heinz et al., 2023). Similarly, Lenora [89 years old] described how sewing for residents at her retirement community and her family gave her a sense of purpose, noting, "Sewing is both a hobby and a necessity". These activities highlight how older adults maintained well-being by engaging in roles that reinforced their sense of usefulness and contribution. The sense of being "needed and useful" appeared to be a motivating factor, supporting participants' efforts to remain active and connected to their social environment. A subtheme in the study highlighted the role of technology in fostering social connectivity and maintaining interpersonal relationships, particularly among older adults. Participants emphasized that digital tools enhanced opportunities for companionship and social engagement, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Heinz et al., 2023). Elizabeth [68 years old] expressed appreciation for platforms like Zoom, which allowed her to stay connected with

others during periods of isolation (Heinz et al., 2023). Similarly, Sally [71 years old] noted that her iPad and iPhone facilitated meaningful interactions, such as reading stories to her grandson, thus maintaining emotional bonds despite physical distance (Heinz et al., 2023). Although many participants valued in-person interactions, technology was recognized as an essential tool for sustaining relationships in challenging circumstances. Beyond virtual communication, other participants engaged in caregiving or community activities to enhance their sense of purpose and social relevance (Heinz et al., 2023). For instance, several participants shared that relationships serve as a critical source of meaning in later life, a theme frequently reported among retirees with some individuals documenting these meaningful relationships by capturing photographs or writing personal reflections (Heinz et al., 2023). Overall, the findings underscore that technology plays both a practical and emotional role, enabling older adults to maintain social belonging and relevance, especially when traditional forms of interaction are limited.

The final recurring theme in the discourse on positive aging is having a goal-oriented mindset, whether that be through cognitive and physical development, learning new things, or planning for the future (Heinz et al., 2023). The older adults from the study demonstrated an intentional forward-thinking mindset, motivated by personal goals, ongoing development, and future aspirations (Heinz et al., 2023). Their objectives varied across domains, including maintaining physical fitness and participating in informal lifelong learning activities. Ava [76 years old], for instance, emphasized the cognitive value of leisure activities, stating, “Mah Jong gives me a chance to exercise my brain and practice logical thinking” (Heinz et al., 2023). Similarly, Elizabeth [68 years old] reflected on the intellectual demands of facilitating book clubs at her retirement community, noting, “For several years, one of my greatest joys was facilitating the book clubs where I live. With this responsibility, I had to really fine-tune my

analysis of our books and find ways to share this information in an engaging way”. These examples underscore how goal-directed behaviours support cognitive engagement, personal growth, and fulfillment, playing a pivotal role in maintaining psychological well-being and meaningful involvement throughout later life. Participants articulated their engagement with fitness activities and the associated goals they set for themselves. One individual remarked, “I strive to challenge myself by diversifying my activities, including nature walks, yoga, swimming, and various forms of aerobics” (Heinz et al., 2023). Bernadette [66 years old] further emphasized the synergistic physical and cognitive advantages derived from playing the piano, stating, “Engaging with the keys alleviates my arthritis while reading music exercises my brain”. A common theme among participants was their dedication to persistence and self-challenge. They expressed a desire to remain active and involved in their lives, consistently pushing themselves to maintain their capabilities (Heinz et al., 2023). From the perspective of lifelong learning, numerous participants reflected on their participation in various classes, encompassing physical fitness, art, and other educational disciplines (Heinz et al., 2023). These objectives served to motivate individuals to engage in novel activities, enhance their aspirations, and sustain both physical and mental activity. Furthermore, Heinz et al. (2023) observed that participants with limited mobility or more intricate health conditions exhibited a tendency to photograph items within their homes or objects observable from their windows.

Given that current studies highlight the significance of engaging in meaningful and cognitively stimulating activities, maintaining strong social ties, and participating in community networks as essential determinants of psychosocial well-being and functional capacity among older adults, Park et al. (2024) wanted to develop a new measure that would be able to consider all those aspects. Building on this holistic perspective, they aimed to advance the measurement

of positive aging by developing and validating the Positive Aging Scale (PAS), a novel self-report tool (Park et al., 2024). The PAS is designed to assess various facets of psychosocial well-being, with a particular focus on meaningful everyday activities, social group memberships, and individuals' general functional capacity, thereby offering a nuanced evaluation of aging beyond physical or subjective health markers (Park et al., 2024). Utilizing this newly developed scale, Park et al. (2024) investigated the construct of positive aging among older adults and examined its correlations with various measures of general health, well-being, and cognitive functioning. The findings indicated that a unidimensional solution provided the most accurate representation of the data, with a single factor loading on eight items and exhibiting acceptable reliability (Park et al., 2024). This solution was invariant across age groups, revealing that PAS scores were positively correlated with general health, well-being, and cognitive function, thereby underscoring its utility in assessing outcomes related to positive aging that is relevant to recent scholarly literature (Park et al., 2024). The PAS transcends a narrow definition by providing a comprehensive measure of positive aging that includes not only the maintenance of independence but also the significance of sustaining connections and receiving support from familial and societal networks. Accordingly, the PAS offers a more balanced assessment framework that facilitates the evaluation of the potential impact of preventative interventions, extending beyond a mere focus on the adverse effects of aging on individual well-being (Park et al., 2024). It appears the PAS is poised to play a crucial role in advancing research related to healthcare policy, prevention, and community intervention.

### **Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices**

#### **Discussion of Findings**

The literature highlights the inherent complexity of the aging process, emphasizing its multifaceted nature across biological, psychological, and social dimensions. Biologically, aging involves physiological changes such as declines in cellular function, cognitive capacity, and physical abilities, with considerable variability in the onset and progression of these changes among individuals (Yang, 2006). Psychologically, aging affects mental health and cognitive functioning, with individual differences in how people manage age-related challenges and maintain psychological well-being (Hupkens et al., 2016). Socially, aging is shaped by cultural norms, family dynamics, and socioeconomic factors, all of which influence the quality of life and access to resources (Ayalon & Roy, 2022). The interaction of these biological, psychological, and social factors, along with diverse personal experiences and cultural contexts, renders aging a highly individualized process. No single factor operates in isolation; instead, aging unfolds through a complex network of interrelated influences.

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a vital component of aging, encompassing individuals' self-reported evaluations of their overall happiness, life satisfaction, and emotional health. As individuals age, their experiences, personal evaluations, and perceptions of health significantly shape their quality of life, influencing how they adapt to the challenges associated with aging (Liu et al., 2023). High levels of SWB promote resilience, foster improved mental health, and support a more active and meaningful lifestyle, even amidst physical decline or social transitions (Liu et al., 2023). In contrast, low SWB—marked by dissatisfaction or emotional distress—can intensify the negative effects of aging, resulting in poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, fostering SWB among older adults is crucial, as it reflects not only their immediate emotional state but also their long-term quality of life and capacity for meaningful engagement with their environment. Moreover, SWB is shaped by various

intersecting factors, including positive affect, emotional profiles, perceived health, functional limitations, and cultural norms. These dimensions are critical to consider in the design of interventions aimed at enhancing well-being and mental health in older populations.

Older adults derive purpose and meaning in their lives through various avenues, including mindful practices and social relationships, at times supported by technological advancements (Heinz et al., 2023). Older adults reported that establishing new goals—ranging from acquiring new skills to engaging in physical activities—is instrumental in enhancing their sense of purpose (Heinz et al., 2023). In the context of older adulthood, the continuous refinement and pursuit of these sources of meaning are essential. This process frequently entails relinquishing previous activities that once conferred significance, such as professional careers, while simultaneously exploring new hobbies or interests (Heinz et al., 2023). Additionally, as individuals confront health impairments, they may need to modify their interests and activities to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose. This transition further exemplifies how older adults utilize components of the socioemotional selectivity theory to promote their overall well-being.

### **Limitations**

Although current research offers valuable insight into the mental health of older adults and advances the development of interventions promoting positive aging and mental health, it is crucial to recognize and critically engage with the structural constraints and power dynamics that perpetuate societal inequities affecting the elderly population. Addressing these systemic barriers is essential to ensure that advancements in research and treatment are equitably accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of aging individuals across varying social and economic contexts. Ageism, along with health and social inequities, represents a significant challenge to the well-being of older adults. A Canadian study revealed that 63% of individuals aged 65 and above

reported direct experiences of ageism (Shield, 2023). This form of discrimination operates on both individual and societal levels—manifesting through biased attitudes, behaviours, and assumptions about older adults, as well as through systemic policies and practices that marginalize them (Shield, 2023). Ageism has profound implications for mental health, contributing to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among older adults (Shield, 2023). Additionally, it is strongly correlated with elder abuse, which undermines quality of life and escalates the risk of mortality (Shield, 2023). Ageism often intersects with mental health stigma, creating significant barriers to the diagnosis, care, and treatment of mental illness and dementia in older adults (Shield, 2023). Despite increasing awareness, pervasive misconceptions persist, framing these conditions as inevitable aspects of the aging process. As a result, older adults may minimize their symptoms and attempt self-management rather than seeking professional intervention. When healthcare providers hold ageist attitudes, delays in diagnosis and restricted access to care become more pronounced (Shield, 2023). Furthermore, both societal and internalized mental health stigma independently contribute to the underutilization of mental health services resulting in many older adults perceiving seeking mental health care as a sign of personal weakness or an inability to cope effectively (Shield, 2023). Mistrust toward mental health professionals, discomfort with treatment processes, and misconceptions about the nature of care further discourage engagement, leaving many without adequate psychological support. Evidence suggests that ageist attitudes and practices persist across individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels (Ayalon & Roy, 2022). There also remains no consensus on the underlying causes of cross-cultural differences in the perception and experience of ageism. Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed, including the modernization hypothesis, variations in the pace of population aging, the demographic proportion of older adults, and GATEism, as

well as the specific dimensions of ageism being measured (Ayalon & Roy, 2022). However, none of these models sufficiently account for the complexities observed in empirical data, highlighting the need for more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that better capture the cultural and contextual nuances influencing experiences of ageism across societies. These findings underscore the importance of further inquiry into the nuanced manifestations of ageism across cultural and societal contexts. Addressing these intersecting barriers is essential to improving mental health outcomes among older populations.

Counsellors can address this issue within their practice by actively participating in or designing public awareness campaigns aimed at mitigating ageism and reducing the stigma associated with mental health. (Shield, 2023). Advocacy by counsellors can help to challenge these biases and promote a more inclusive understanding of aging, which is essential for fostering positive mental health outcomes and well-being. These initiatives may include simply acknowledging it in sessions, community outreach, presentations, or social media efforts designed to underscore the importance of mental health care for older adults while challenging pervasive misconceptions. By providing targeted educational materials and resources on mental health, counsellors can facilitate informed discussions and promote understanding among clients and their families (Shield, 2023). Counsellors are well-positioned to provide education to family members, healthcare providers, and society at large, working to reduce ageist attitudes and increase empathy for older adults' mental health concerns. Ultimately, advocacy enhances the therapeutic process by ensuring that older clients feel supported, respected, and valued, empowering them to navigate aging with dignity and resilience. Additionally, incorporating group counselling and peer support groups can effectively reduce internalized stigma, as older adults often find value in sharing experiences with peers who have navigated similar challenges

(Shield, 2023). Continuous assessment and feedback from older adult clients are also essential for refining these approaches, ensuring that the strategies implemented address the diverse backgrounds and unique needs of this population. Through the integration of these elements, counsellors can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment, ultimately promoting improved mental health outcomes for older adults.

### **Implications & Future Directions**

As discussed in chapter two, many interventions have operated under a limited conceptualization of aging, primarily concentrating on older adults' health declines and medical outcomes, rather than addressing their multidimensional well-being (Park et al., 2024). The PAS framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of positive aging by extending beyond the preservation of independence to emphasize meaningful connections with family, community, and society, along with a focus on holistic well-being (Park et al., 2024). This shift highlights the need for more sophisticated interventions that address factors directly associated with positive aging. Preventative interventions should go beyond a singular focus on the negative impacts of aging but rather fostering what is considered beneficial to promoting positive aging. The literature emphasizes that maintaining a positive perspective on aging is essential for fostering adaptability and leveraging a deeper sense of purpose, enabling older adults to establish meaningful goals, sustain life direction, and engage in activities that enhance their sense of value and fulfillment in later life (Heinz et al., 2023). This outlook is closely associated with subjective well-being (SWB) and perceived health, both of which play integral roles in promoting a fulfilling and meaningful experience of aging. Mental health therapists can help emphasize this by understanding the themes of positive aging, such as mindfulness practice, meaningful engagement in activities that foster social belonging and relevance, as well as intentional

forward-thinking aspirations. Counsellors should serve as advocates for older adult clients to ensure they receive equitable and comprehensive care that respects their unique experiences and needs.

An alternate action proposed by Lu et al. (2023) for promoting social capital in healthy aging was especially noteworthy. Empirical research demonstrates a significant association between social capital and improved physical and mental health outcomes in older adults (Lu et al., 2023). The social network perspective conceptualizes social capital as resources—such as information channels—embedded within social networks that facilitate collective action through participation in these networks (Lu et al., 2023). Social capital can be accessed either by individuals within a group or by the community as a whole. Higher levels of social engagement, expanded social networks, robust social support, and residence in neighbourhoods with strong social cohesion are consistently correlated with lower risks of functional disability, depression, and anxiety, as well as with greater mental well-being and self-efficacy among older adults (Lu et al., 2023). Therefore, enhancing social capital emerges as a strategically advantageous approach to fostering healthy aging and meeting the escalating demands for long-term care driven by an aging population. Older adults possess a rich array of life experiences and maintain a deep-rooted connection to their communities, often demonstrating a stronger sense of neighbourhood belonging than younger or middle-aged adults (Lu et al., 2023). However, as aging progresses, older adults often become increasingly confined to their homes and immediate communities, resulting in a gradual contraction of their social world. Although many older adults report satisfaction with smaller social networks, limited resources, accessible services, and opportunities for social engagement can hinder their ability to sustain meaningful community participation (Lu et al., 2023). Therefore, fostering social capital among older adults necessitates

a community-based approach that emphasizes creating accessible social opportunities, thereby enabling older adults to remain active, engaged, and valued within their communities (Lu et al., 2023). Lu et al. (2023) aims to advance scholarly discourse by introducing a theoretical framework for strengthening social capital within the healthy aging context, illustrated through the practice of timebanking. They identify three targeted intervention points designed to deepen the emotional significance of sustained social interactions and community involvement among older adults. First, encouraging mutual support and reciprocity addresses the developmental importance of altruistic objectives, which become increasingly valued in later life. Second, enhancing visibility and acknowledgment of older adults' volunteer contributions fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, thus supporting volunteer retention. Third, rewarding these contributions through incentives that enhance quality interactions with family or familiar social networks—such as shared day trips or educational workshops—provides emotional satisfaction, reinforcing social bonds and well-being (Lu et al., 2023). To give a clear illustration, timebanking can look like having older adults accumulate time credits, rendering their roles within the community both visible and quantifiable, fostering a sense of purpose and achievement (Lu et al., 2023). These credits signify not only goodwill and meaningful time investment but also act as an alternative community currency, which can be exchanged for essential services or shared with family members. Additionally, timebanking enables asset-building within the community, grounded in the recognition of every individual as a valuable contributor. For instance, the Zeitvorsorge St. Gallen timebank in Switzerland enables adults to earn credits for future support by helping others, reframing older adults as active contributors rather than mere consumers of services (Lu et al., 2023). This approach mitigates overreliance on

professional resources, thereby promoting societal sustainability in meeting long-term care demands amid population aging.

The timebanking model holds promise for fostering emotional fulfillment through social engagement for older adults, positioning them as active contributors to community development and advancing a more inclusive society. The initial aim is to provide opportunities for older adults to meet their emotional and social goals, enhancing their motivation for community participation. However, achieving large-scale mutual support and participation relies on recognizing the valuable assets older adults bring and engaging institutions in building these assets at the community level while promoting equity and inclusivity at a societal level. By strengthening social capital on an individual basis, older adults can be empowered to advocate for community asset-building and societal inclusivity. This multilevel approach to social capital can positively influence not only the health of older adults but also that of others within their social networks. While this framework is promising, it would require substantial societal shifts to implement effectively.

## **Conclusion**

As previously mentioned, mental health practitioners are highly likely to encounter aging-related topics, regardless of specialization. Counsellors in training often have limited knowledge about working with older adults and feel underprepared, with their perspectives largely influenced by personal experiences with aging family members (Santiago, 2013). Recognizing this challenge prompted a deeper exploration of strategies to support the mental health of older adults. This research has provided valuable opportunities to address key questions about aging, equipping counsellors with the knowledge and skills necessary to support older clients holistically. It is hoped that this capstone has not only contributed to a broader

understanding of aging but also enhanced awareness of the diversity and complexities inherent in the aging process.

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