

## Yaşlı Yetişkinlerde Psikolojik Dayanıklılık: Halk Sağlığı Perspektifi

Seher Palanbek Yavaş<sup>1</sup>

### Özet

Yaşlı bireylerde psikolojik dayanıklılık, bireysel ve toplumsal düzeyde büyük önem taşır. Dünya genelinde yaşlanan nüfus artışı, 2030'da her altı kişiden birinin 60 yaş ve üzeri olacağını öngörmektedir. Bu değişim özellikle düşük ve orta gelirli ülkelerde hızla yaşanmakta, genetik ve epigenetik faktörler uzun yaşam süresi üzerinde etkili olmaktadır. Ancak, çevresel etkilere birlikte bu faktörlerin kapsamlı incelenmesi gereklidir. Yaşlı bireylerin yaklaşık %14'ü ruh sağlığı sorunları yaşamakta olup depresyon ve anksiyete en yaygın problemlerdir. Ayrıca, bu yaş grubunda intiharla bağlantılı ölüm oranları oldukça yüksektir. Sosyal izolasyon, gelir kaybı ve hareket kabiliyeti gibi yaşlanmaya özgü zorluklar psikolojik dayanıklılığı zorlaştırmaktadır. Buna ek olarak, ruh sağlığı sorunlarına yönelik damgalama, bireylerin yardım almasını engelleyebilmektedir. Psikolojik dayanıklılık, stresle başa çıkma ve duygu düzenleme yaklaşımlarıyla açıklanabilir. Bireylerin stres karşısındaki başa çıkma stratejilerini problem ve duygu odaklı olarak sınıflandırmıştır. Duygu düzenleme ise bireylerin duygularını tanımlayıp yönetme becerilerini kapsar. Bu süreçler bireylerin durum değerlendirmesi ve duygu ifadesi üzerindeki etkileriyle dayanıklılığı artırabilir. Yaşlı bireylerde dayanıklılık, sosyal destek, gelir seviyesi, iyimserlik ve özsaygı gibi faktörlerle ilişkilidir. Türkiye'de bu konuda yapılan çalışmalar sınırlıdır. Politika önerileri arasında evde sağlık hizmetleri, dijital erişim, sosyal merkezler ve ekonomik destekler yer almaktadır. Psikolojik danışmanlık, yalnızlıkla mücadele ve yaşlı dostu şehir planlamaları, dayanıklılığı artıracak diğer önlemler arasındadır. Bu yaklaşımlar, yaşlı bireylerin yaşam kalitesini iyileştirebilir ve toplumsal dayanışmayı güçlendirebilir.

1 Öğretim Görevlisi Dr.,Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart Üniversitesi Tıp Fakültesi, seher.palanbakyavas@comu.edu.tr,<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8113-0477>

## 1. Ageing of the Population

Human longevity has seen remarkable progress, with many individuals expecting to live well into their sixties and beyond. In every nation, the expansion of the older population, both in absolute terms and as a share of the total population, is becoming increasingly evident. Projections indicate that by 2030, one out of every six individuals worldwide will be aged 60 or above. At that point, the number of people in this age group will grow from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion. By the middle of the century, the global population of those aged 60 and older is expected to reach 2.1 billion, effectively doubling (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022) ('Ageing and Health', 2024). Furthermore, the number of individuals aged 80 and above is anticipated to rise threefold from 2020 to 2050, reaching a staggering 426 million. This shift in demographic structure, referred to as population ageing, represents a growing concentration of older individuals within national populations. Although this trend was initially observed in affluent nations—for instance, in Japan, where 30% of the population is already over 60—it is now unfolding most rapidly in countries with low and middle incomes ('Ageing and Health', 2024) (Chen et al., 2022). Research indicates that genetic factors account for approximately 25% of the variability in lifespan, with this influence becoming more pronounced in individuals who reach advanced ages. Epigenetic factors also play a crucial role in the ageing process. Notably, the delayed onset of methylation changes observed in centenarians contributes significantly to their healthy ageing, and this epigenetic advantage may be inherited across generations. However, to fully understand the mechanisms underlying healthy ageing and longevity, there is a critical need for large-scale studies that integrate both genetic and environmental factors (Brooks-Wilson, 2013).

## 2. The mental health of older adults

It's a sobering fact that approximately 14% of adults aged 60 and older live with a mental health disorder. According to the Global Health Estimates (GHE) published in 2019, these conditions account for 10.6% of total disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) among older adults. Depression and anxiety are identified as the most prevalent mental health issues within this demographic. Additionally, GHE 2019 highlights that individuals aged 60 and above represent a significant proportion of suicide-related deaths worldwide, comprising 27.2% of all cases ('Mental health of older adults, 2023)

Although many older adults maintain good mental health, a significant portion are at risk of developing mental and neurological disorders. Furthermore, they often face the challenge of managing multiple medical conditions simultaneously. In addition to these health concerns, various social, psychological, and environmental factors also play a critical role in shaping the mental well-being of older individuals. Older adults are susceptible to multiple risk factors that contribute to mental health challenges. Like other age groups, they may encounter common life stressors, but they also face unique difficulties associated with ageing, such as significant declines in cognitive and functional capacities. Additionally, issues like reduced income after retirement, mobility limitations, frailty, and chronic medical conditions often necessitate long-term care. These combined factors can lead to social isolation, loneliness, or psychological distress, highlighting the crucial need for tailored and specialised care to address their unique needs. (Javed, 2022). One of the significant challenges related to the mental health issues of older adults is the persistent stigma surrounding mental illness. Individuals with mental health disorders are often perceived as weak, incapable, and unable to address their own problems. Consequently, many adults delay seeking healthcare services, leading to adverse outcomes such as delayed diagnosis and treatment (Mendoça Lima & Ivbijaro, 2013).

### 3. Psychological Resilience

Exposure to hardships—such as poverty, job loss, severe injury, or bereavement—often serves as a strong predictor of disruptions in psychological functioning. However, the extent to which individuals are affected by these adversities varies significantly. While some people experience prolonged, severe impairments, others show minimal or no lasting effects and may exhibit signs of growth. Consider, for example, two individuals who have lost a loved one. Following the initial shock and grief, one person might continue to struggle for years with intense distress, hopelessness, and depression. In contrast, another person may experience the same initial grief but start to recover within a short period, experiencing sadness for a few months but avoiding chronic depression, and might even develop a heightened sense of meaning and life satisfaction (Bonanno, Romero, & Klein, 2015) (Troy et al., 2023). Returning to normal more quickly or adapting to the new standard more easily when encountering such events can be called psychological resilience. The psychological processes that explain resilience are stress and the approach to coping with it, and the other is the emotion regulation approach. This resilience, in the face of such adversity,

is a testament to the human spirit and the potential for growth even in the most challenging circumstances.

#### **4. The Stress and Coping Approach**

Lazarus and Folkman are two prominent scholars who have extensively studied the mechanisms of coping with stress. These researchers focused on the interactions between individuals and their environment, defining stress as a situation where an individual perceives their resources as strained or their well-being as threatened by external circumstances. When individuals experience stress, they often cope, which involves continuous cognitive efforts to manage the stressors and their responses. In this context, it can be argued that adaptive coping strategies positively foster resilience (Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985) (Folkman, 1984).

Although a definitive agreement on the broader dimensions of coping has not yet been reached, three commonly adopted classification systems include problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping approach versus avoidance coping (actively engaging with versus avoiding a stressor) and cognitive versus behavioural coping (modifying thoughts versus altering behaviours) Among these three, the distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping is the most frequently utilised. However, research often highlights that problem- and emotion-focused coping are not mutually exclusive. (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010)(Folkman & Lazarus, 1980)(Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). The coping approach has several limitations. Defining stressors based on individuals' subjective evaluations within the stress framework can lead to circular reasoning between stressors and stress responses. Moreover, this framework often considers stressors and responses in a generally negative light, potentially overlooking specific emotional states (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015)(Troy et al., 2023)

#### **5. Emotion-Regulation Approach**

Emotion regulation is partly regarded as a coping mechanism. It encompasses the processes through which individuals determine which emotions to experience, when to experience them, and how these emotions are expressed and managed. Emotion regulation is closely linked to resilience, as it plays a significant role in how individuals regulate the emotions they experience in response to adversities, thereby influencing their overall functioning. The first step in emotion regulation is recognising and directing attention to one's emotions. Being able to distinguish emotions such as

happiness, sadness, and anxiety as either positive or negative affect is crucial at this stage (Epel et al., 2018)(Troy et al., 2023).

The emotion regulation approach is distinguished by its emphasis on a relatively small number of well-defined families of emotion regulation strategies, with clear conceptual distinctions between them. For instance, according to Gross's process model, emotion regulation strategies are categorised based on the stage of the emotion generation process they target. In this model, emotional responses result from factors such as the perception of specific aspects of a situation, the direction or diversion of attention to or from certain stimuli, and the evaluation of those stimuli. Each component involved in this process—situation, attention, and appraisal—as well as the emotional response itself can serve as a target for emotion regulation (James J Gross, 2015)(J J Gross, 1998).

## 6. Resilience in ageing

Resilience refers to adaptive responses that enable individuals to cope with challenges and restore typical functioning and growth following stressful circumstances, drawing on crucial psychological resources. In later life, these challenges often involve encountering stressful experiences such as the loss of close relationships, accidents, health issues and disabilities, financial hardship, social isolation, familial disputes, domestic and urban violence, and persistent stress associated with social roles (Fontes & Neri, 2015).

Positive adaptation is the ability to thrive and grow successfully despite facing risks. It involves effectively managing stress, including minimising stressful events' effects, quickly recovering from trauma, and gradually controlling adverse reactions while promoting positive behaviours and outcomes to overcome challenges. As a result, older adults are considered psychologically resilient when they can endure hardship, demonstrating successful adaptation by managing stressful situations or regaining their previous levels of well-being—both objective and subjective—after experiencing adverse events (Hardy, Concato, & Gill, 2004) (Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982).

Studies on resilience in older adults exhibit considerable diversity. In a study by Thomas et al., resilience was identified as a significant predictor of variations in well-being, independent of the need for coping strategies. (Tomás, Sancho, Melendez, & Mayordomo, 2012).

Mertens et al. identified a significant relationship between resilience and physical, mental, and social functioning in their study. Furthermore,

according to their findings, higher levels of social support and income contribute to successful ageing (Mertens, Bosma, Groffen, & van Eijk, 2012). Gooding et al. compared older and younger adults and found that older individuals demonstrated greater resilience, particularly in emotional regulation and problem-solving. In contrast, younger individuals exhibited higher resilience in terms of social support. (Gooding, Hurst, Johnson, & Tarrier, 2012). In a study by Rosada-Medina et al. on resilience in older adults living up to 100 years, emotional stability, optimism, behavioural factors, and emotional-behavioural skills were identified as factors associated with successful ageing. (Rosado-Medina, Rodríguez-Gómez, & Altieri-Ramirez, 2012). In their article employing factor analysis to identify common psychological resources related to resilience, Windle et al. identified self-esteem, personal competence, and a sense of control as shared elements (Windle, Markland, & Woods, 2008). In a study by Fortes et al. examining the relationship between resilience and sociodemographic and cognitive function variables, no significant relationship was found between resilience and sociodemographic variables. However, many subjective memory complaints were associated with low resilience levels. Additionally, a significant correlation was observed between the results of the resilience scale and the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) (Fortes, et al., 2009).

One of the assumptions of lifelong resilience is using coping strategies and emotional regulation against the adverse effects of stress factors in old age to ensure functionality and continuity. Negative events in old age can take the following forms: illness and death of a loved one, illness and accidents, loss of prestige and even uncontrollable events affecting relatives. Despite all these, older people can experience a successful ageing process by maintaining optimism, self-esteem, social participation and relationship networks (Fontes & Neri, 2015).

In Turkey, there has been increasing literature on this subject since the beginning of the 2000s. However, this issue has been discussed mainly in children, adolescents, and adults. In this context, there are relatively fewer studies on the psychological resilience of older adults (Akfirat & Özsoy, 2021). More studies investigating the psychological resilience of older adults in the context of Turkish culture are needed.

## **7. Conclusion**

The objective of enhancing resilience in older adults is significant at the individual and societal levels. In this regard, governments can implement several policy and improvement measures. First and foremost, it is imperative

to facilitate access to health services. This entails ensuring the widespread provision of home health services for individuals with mobility difficulties and establishing digital access through telehealth applications. Establishing elderly-friendly community centres and support groups can prevent social isolation and enhance psychological resilience. From an economic perspective, measures such as enhancing pensions and tax exemptions to mitigate the financial burden on the elderly are crucial. In order to enhance physical resilience, publicly funded sports and exercise programmes, in addition to nutrition counselling services, could be made available. To safeguard psychological well-being, cost-effective psychological counselling services and community-based initiatives to combat loneliness should be introduced. Furthermore, environmental enhancements are crucial, such as incorporating disability-sensitive urban planning and implementing elderly-friendly, ergonomically designed housing projects. Furthermore, policies that facilitate digital literacy training for older adults, enabling them to benefit from technological advancements, and fostering intergenerational solidarity through awareness campaigns, can also enhance resilience. These measures will enhance the quality of life for older adults and reinforce social solidarity.

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