

Psychological, Social and Physical Needs and Problems of Older Persons

Introduction

Old age is the last stage of human life. People who are 60 years or above are generally called **older persons** or the elderly. As a person grows old, their body, mind, and social life all change. These changes create many needs and problems. A social worker must understand these needs to provide proper care and support.

PART 1 — PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

A) Psychological Needs

- 1. Need for Love and Affection** Elderly people need to feel loved by their family members. They want emotional warmth and care from their children and grandchildren.
 - 2. Need for Respect and Dignity** They want to be treated with respect. They do not want to feel useless or burdensome. Being valued by society is very important for their mental peace.
 - 3. Need for a Sense of Purpose** Older persons need to feel that their life still has meaning. If they feel purposeless after retirement, it leads to depression and sadness.
 - 4. Need for Mental Stimulation** Their mind also needs activity. Reading, conversations, religious activities, or hobbies help keep their mind active.
 - 5. Need for Emotional Security** They need to feel safe and secure — that someone will take care of them if something goes wrong.
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B) Psychological Problems

- 1. Depression** Depression is one of the most common problems in old age. It happens due to loss of spouse, loneliness, health decline, or feeling unwanted. Signs include sadness, crying, loss of interest, and hopelessness.
- 2. Anxiety** Older persons often worry about their health, death, finances, or being a burden on others. This constant worry leads to anxiety.

3. Loss of Memory (Dementia / Alzheimer's Disease) Many elderly people start forgetting things. In serious cases, this becomes **Alzheimer's disease**, where the person cannot recognize even their own family members. This is very distressing for both the person and the family.

4. Fear of Death Older persons often think about death. Some accept it peacefully, but others develop a fear of dying, which causes mental distress.

5. Low Self-Esteem After retirement, many elderly people feel they are no longer useful. This reduces their confidence and self-worth.

6. Grief and Bereavement Loss of spouse, friends, or close ones is common in old age. This grief can become a serious psychological problem if not dealt with properly.

Example: An elderly man who retired from a senior government post may feel worthless when he is no longer consulted. This can lead to depression.

PART 2 — SOCIAL NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

A) Social Needs

1. Need for Social Relationships Elderly people need friends and family. Regular social contact keeps them emotionally healthy. Isolation is very harmful.

2. Need for Social Role They need to feel that they still have a role in the family and society — as grandparents, advisors, or community elders.

3. Need for Community Participation Being part of religious groups, clubs, or neighbourhood activities gives them a sense of belonging.

4. Need for Recognition They want their past contributions (as workers, parents, or citizens) to be acknowledged and respected.

B) Social Problems

1. Loneliness and Social Isolation Many older persons live alone, especially in cities. Children move away for jobs. This leaves the elderly without company, which seriously affects their mental health.

2. Loss of Social Status and Power In traditional Indian society, elders had high status. But today, with urbanisation and nuclear families, their authority has reduced. They often feel ignored or sidelined.

3. Empty Nest Syndrome When all children leave home, elderly parents feel a deep sense of emptiness. This is called **Empty Nest Syndrome**.

4. Elder Abuse Some elderly persons face physical, emotional, or financial abuse by family members or caregivers. This is a serious social problem.

5. Neglect by Family In many cases, elderly parents are not properly cared for. They may be left in old age homes or ignored in the family.

6. Retirement Shock After retirement, the person loses their workplace identity, regular routine, and social network. This sudden change can be very hard to adjust to.

Scholar Reference: *Erik Erikson* described old age as the stage of **Ego Integrity vs. Despair** — if older persons feel their life was meaningful, they achieve ego integrity; otherwise they fall into despair.

PART 3 — PHYSICAL NEEDS AND PROBLEMS

A) Physical Needs

1. Need for Adequate Nutrition Elderly people need a balanced diet — rich in calcium, vitamins, and proteins — to maintain their health.

2. Need for Healthcare Regular medical check-ups, medicines, and access to hospitals are very important for older persons.

3. Need for Safe and Comfortable Housing They need homes that are accessible — with no stairs, non-slip floors, proper lighting, and proximity to healthcare facilities.

4. Need for Rest and Sleep The body of an older person needs more rest. Comfortable sleeping arrangements and reduced workload are necessary.

5. Need for Physical Activity Light exercise, yoga, or walking helps maintain their mobility and overall health.

B) Physical Problems

1. Chronic Diseases Old age brings many long-term illnesses like diabetes, high blood pressure (hypertension), heart disease, and arthritis. These diseases reduce the quality of life.

2. Reduced Mobility Bones become weak (osteoporosis), joints become painful (arthritis), and muscles lose strength. This makes movement difficult and increases the risk of falls.

3. Sensory Loss Vision becomes poor, hearing decreases, and the sense of taste and smell also reduce with age. This affects daily functioning and enjoyment of life.

4. Urinary and Digestive Problems Incontinence (loss of bladder control) and constipation are very common in old age. These are embarrassing and affect daily life.

5. Sleep Disorders Many elderly people have difficulty sleeping at night, leading to fatigue during the day.

6. Malnutrition Due to poor appetite, dental problems, or low income, many elderly persons do not eat properly. This leads to weakness and poor immunity.

7. Dependency on Others As physical health declines, elderly persons need help with basic activities like bathing, dressing, and cooking. This dependency can hurt their self-esteem.

Example: An elderly woman with arthritis and poor eyesight who lives alone cannot cook or go to the hospital by herself — she needs physical, social, and psychological support at the same time.

Conclusion

The needs and problems of older persons are **interconnected** — a physical illness can cause depression, and loneliness can worsen physical health. Social work with the elderly must take a **holistic approach** — addressing physical, psychological, and social dimensions together. Government policies like the **Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007** and schemes like old age pensions aim to address these problems. However, family support, community care, and professional social work services remain the most important pillars of elder care.