

Psychology

Discuss to what extent mental factors impact ageing.

Various research studies have widely acknowledged that physical health and lifestyle choices can have a major impact on ageing (*Visser et al, 2018*). This leaves one to question the impact that mental factors have on the biological ageing process. Ageing includes both the biological process and the psychological. This essay will discuss the extent to which mental factors impact ageing. According to the *APA Dictionary of Psychology (2018)*, ageing can be defined as ‘the biological and psychological changes associated with chronological age’. The mental factors that will be discussed in the first half of the essay are mental health and then the second half of the essay will discuss the effects of the disorders such as long-term anxiety and depression on aging. It will be argued that having poor mental health and having mental disorders for a prolonged period of time will have a significant and detrimental impact on ageing just as much as physical impacts.

Poor mental health impacts /depression

Mental health is defined by the *World Health Organization* as ‘a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life’. Poor mental health can be said to rapidly increase the process of ageing and cause negative effects on the experience of ageing. This includes a decrease in quality of life. This is supported by a recent study by Galkin et al (2022). Galkin et al used blood test data from the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study and developed an ageing clock which can detect acceleration in ageing. The participants (4846) all had contrasting mental states, marital statuses and smoking

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status. Galkin et al found that those who had experienced negative feelings such as loneliness and unhappiness and had poor mental health had a significant increase in biological age in comparison to other factors measured like their smoking and marital status. Through this research, Galkin concluded that 'organismal ageing is not only determined by physical factors but also, to a certain degree, affected by mental state' and on the other hand, positive feelings of happiness and security had a positive effect on one's ageing. This supports the argument that mental health does have a significant effect on ageing as it highlights that poor mental health is accelerating the process of ageing. This study is reliable as it is a longitudinal study which looks at the effects of mental health on ageing over a prolonged time. This study emphasises the importance of mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, mental effects are a significant factor towards ageing and thus should not be ignored especially because we live in a society where life expectancy is higher, and therefore the ageing population is increasing.

Moreover, the negative effect of mental health [particularly the mental disorder of depression] on ageing is furtherly presented through Han, K. et al's study (2015). The study used self-reporting questionnaires from 171 Korean adult males each aged between 45 and 77 years old. Han K et al's study found a positive correlation between healthy ageing and high self-esteem whereas factors such as depression and loneliness had been detrimental to the process of ageing. According to the results, depression is the factor with the greatest influence on healthy ageing which again supports the argument that mental factors such as depression has a significant negative impact on the process of ageing. However, it could be argued that this study is limited as it may lack validity depending on how honest the

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participants were on the self-reporting questionnaire. Despite this, however, it is clear to see that negative emotions such as unhappiness and loneliness affect ageing by accelerating the process. Therefore, as a society, we should not ignore the mental effects on ageing as it is equally impactful with the physical impacts such as lifestyle decisions.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a mental disorder where people increasingly worry which can potentially cause a higher blood pressure. The mental state of anxiety is seen to have a relationship with accelerated ageing. This is depicted through Mutz et al 2022 study that aimed to look at age changes between adults who had a history of anxiety compared to healthy controls. They recruited 500,000 adults each aged between 37 and 73 however only 332 078 adults were used in the significant set of data, and they examined 15 physiological measures. The case group that had anxiety disorders resulted in having a lower blood pressure, lower hand grip strength and a higher pulse rate and body composition in comparison to the control group. From this, Mutz et al concluded that the results of the case group of people with a long history of anxiety had differed from the control group who were healthier mentally and thus aged healthier. Mutz found that participants with mental illnesses like bipolar disorder had a higher biological age than their birth age. Mutz found that in participants who had depression, their biological age was one year older than their actual calendar age and that participants who had anxiety were found to be about 0.7 years older in biological age. This shows how anxiety and depression does have a significant impact on the acceleration of ageing and how it has an impact on the biological process of aging like the physical factors.

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Stress

In addition, another impact mental health has upon the aging process is emotional stress.

This results in cortisol increase in the brain that has been argued to further physical age. Not

only does additional stress speed up the process of aging, it also can lead to vulnerability to

health problems like heart disease and fluctuations in blood pressure. A study by Cell

metabolism has found that the increase in stress will lead to an increase in biological age

due to stress damaging the DNA in the cells which as a result, accelerates the process of

ageing. This again highlights how mental factors can future exasperate the physical decline

of the ageing process. Populations are now living longer than ever before which causes an

increase of mental health problems. Evidence to support this is from The *National Library of*

Medicine which states that more than 20% of people aged 55 or older may have some type

of mental health problem. Due to these mental factors having a clear impact on the ageing

process, it is vital that mental health should be considered when looking at the differences

of ageing in different people. This hopefully will lead to increased effectiveness in mental

health conventions. Furthermore, not only does stress cause an acceleration in ageing but it

is also said to have caused an acceleration in cognitive decline. Naturally, according to

psychology and science, one's cognitive ability declines as a person ages. However, it brings

to question whether mental factors such as stress can further the decline in cognitive ability.

One example of a project that explores this idea is the ESCAPE project by Scott et al (2015).

They carried out a longitudinal study on whether stress can result in accelerated cognitive

decline. When cognitive decline occurs, this affects a person's memory and their ability to of

decision making and problem-solving. If this happens, this will impact the person's mental

health which will lead to an increased rate of ageing. If this hypothesis is correct, it can be said that stress also impacts cognitive ageing. Therefore, this validates how mental impacts such as stress can affect the ageing process and cognitive functioning.

To conclude it is evident that mental impacts upon ageing should not be ignored especially due to the rise in the ageing population. This essay has evidenced this through looking at the psychological literature and relevant research studies that mental factors have a significant impact on ageing. Mental health is an extremely significant factor as it is proven that there is a correlation between stress/unhappiness and accelerated ageing. This stress also causes damage to cognitive ageing as it accelerates cognitive decline during the process of ageing. Knowing the reasons for change in one's ageing can be extremely helpful as we can discover systems that are able to counteract the negative causes. This could possibly lead to the improvement of effectiveness in the mental health system. This has already been accomplished for the physical impacts of ageing. For example, there is a huge awareness around the consequences and repercussions of smoking and how it will affect your aging and your life span negatively. Consequently, it is evident that more psychological research needs to be done into the effects of mental factors on ageing to remedy these harms on the ageing population. Therefore, it is indisputable that mental factors do have an important impact on ageing through the acceleration of it.

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