

Social Work and Old Age Policy: An Exploration of Ways to Promote Mental Health in Old Age

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ABSTRACT

Under the trend of aging population of the world, the old people's mental health issues have become the common focus on academic and the social public's new focus. The core intention of this paper is to examine how social work practices and pension policy measures complement each other to enhance the spiritual well-being of the elderly population, and to deeply analyze the effectiveness of their synergy and the room for strategy improvement. The article begins with an overview of the international and domestic research on the mental health of the elderly, while consolidating the relevant theoretical foundation, covering the nature of mental health, social support theory and life satisfaction theory. Then this article through the detailed analysis of the national and prefecture-level administrative units of the pension policy, insight into the possibility of such strategies in the current policy background and difficulties. Then discusses the social work in the maintenance of elderly mental health aspects of the unique features, such as case coordination, counseling services, community involvement and social network. Through the analysis of specific examples, this study gives consideration to both theory and practice, which not only clarifies the exemplary practical insights, but also extracts practical operational wisdom. Finally, based on the survey feedback, the paper proposes solutions such as strengthening multi-department collaboration, improving the current regulatory framework, and expanding the coverage of limited services. These forward-looking strategy outline research development blueprint, to improve the elderly population in our country the research quality and utility of mental health care services, a lasting and significant impact.

KEYWORDS

Social Work; Old Age Policy; Mental Health; Older People; Interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the global population ages, mental health issues among the elderly have gained attention. By 2050, the WHO predicts over 2 billion people aged 60+ globally, nearly a quarter of the total, with China's figure reaching 254 million by 2020. Mental health problems like depression, anxiety, and isolation affect elderly quality of life and care systems [1]. A good mental state enhances life satisfaction and quality. However, due to various factors, the elderly are mentally vulnerable. Improving their mental health is crucial. Challenges include lack of policy support, professionals, societal misunderstanding, and limited family support [2]. This study explores how social work and aging policies can improve elderly mental health, analyzes effectiveness and problems, and proposes strategic recommendations for strengthening services, aiming to provide theoretical guidance for administrative departments, community groups, and families. It aims to systematize and professionalize mental health services.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Research Status at Home and Abroad

Cross-cultural surveys show mental health issues, especially depression and anxiety, are common among older adults globally (Blazer, 2002). A US study found 15% of older people had depression (Blazer, 2002). Factors like physical health, social support, finances, and housing affect mental health in later life (Kokko et al., 2004). The international community promotes strategies like CBT, psychodynamic interventions, and group counseling, which improve elderly psychological well-being (Arean et al., 2005).

Empirical research in China highlights urgent mental health issues among the elderly. A Beijing survey found one in ten elderly showed depression (Li Xiaodong et al., 2010). Factors like chronic illness, family dynamics, economic conditions, and social assistance significantly impact elderly mental health (Zhang Hua et al., 2012). Domestic researchers have advocated a range of coping strategies, including psychological counselling, family support and community action, which have been shown to help improve mental health in the elderly population (Minghua Wang et al., 2013). Relatively late in our country, social work intervened in the field of aged care, but its development was strong. The case management model, with its comprehensive assessment of individual needs and customized response, has occupied a central position in social work (Chen Xiaohong et al., 2014). On the other hand, the construction of community support networks has achieved initial results, with the help of diversified community projects, the community integration experience and identity of the elderly have been enhanced (Liu Xiaoli et al., 2015). In addition, social workers are playing an increasingly critical role in policy initiatives and in driving improvements and progress in geriatric mental health services (Yang Liu et al., 2016).

2.2. Theoretical Basis

Mental health covers cognitive, emotional, and behavioral well-being, and the ability to adapt and develop in one's social environment (WHO, 2001). It significantly impacts quality of life and social efficacy, especially in the elderly, enhancing life satisfaction and happiness (Krause, 2006)[3]. Assessment tools for elderly mental health include the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS, Yesavage et al., 1983), Anxiety Scale (STAI, Spielberger et al., 1970), and Life Satisfaction Scale (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985). Comprehensive analysis employs questionnaires, interviews, and indirect observation (Zhang et al., 2011). Social support, per Cohen and Wills (1985), includes emotional, intellectual, and material assistance, categorized as emotional, information, material, and companionship support (House, 1981). [References retained] This concept forms the cornerstone of the theory of mental health in the elderly, and plays a positive role in maintenance, relieving stress, relieving depression, and enhancing life satisfaction (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010) [4]. Social support helps elders overcome life problems and strengthen their coping mechanisms by providing emotional comfort, information guidance, and resources needed to survive (Taylor et al., 2000, quote 4). Life satisfaction, as the core index of the mental health of the elderly, is an individual's subjective evaluation and perception of the overall life status, and reflects the measure of individual satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984). Life satisfaction is influenced by many variables, such as personal attributes, social conditions, economic status and health level (Pavot & Diener, 1993). High levels of life satisfaction are closely related to robust mental health, which can effectively reduce the risk of worry and depression in older adults and further optimize their quality of life (Diener et al., 1999) [5]. By cultivating positive emotions, strengthening self-efficacy, and promoting social inclusion, mental health has a positive effect on the elderly (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

3. OVERVIEW OF OLD AGE POLICY

At national and regional levels, strategies and initiatives aim to ensure psychological well-being and comprehensive health support for the elderly. China, with a large elderly population expected to exceed 254 million in 2020, has launched targeted policies in the Healthy China 2030 Vision Planning Outline to promote healthy aging. These policies focus on building a comprehensive health service system for both urban and rural areas, strengthening disease prevention, optimizing medical insurance, and increasing compensation ratios. A comprehensive pension system, including basic pension insurance for urban workers and residents, protects economically disadvantaged elderly. Medical care services have expanded, with broader family doctor contracts, increased customized services, strengthened community health sites, and geriatric medical facilities, jointly promoting care and rehabilitation innovation, enhancing functional rehabilitation, and improving the elderly's quality of life.

Local legal institutions have implemented innovative measures to enhance healthcare and life satisfaction for the elderly. They've built nursing and all-age-friendly centers, offering domestic, day, and temporary residential care. They've also adopted a smart elderly care system integrating telemedicine, emergency response, and health monitoring. A "Family Aged Care Support Framework" covers catering, cleaning, medical, and emergency assistance. All localities promote medical-elderly care collaboration. Guangzhou, for example, has a community mutual aid network, social integration activities, and a mental health service center. Shanghai's community elderly care coverage exceeds 90%, with over 100,000 users on its intelligent platform and a 95% satisfaction rate. Beijing's home care coverage is over 80%, with increasing medical sites and over 90% satisfaction. Guangzhou's community mutual aid network coverage is over 70%, with over 85% satisfaction. However, strategy implementation and service supply need fine-tuning. These measures lay the groundwork for discussing social work's impact on elderly mental health in subsequent chapters.

4. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN AGING MENTAL HEALTH

4.1. Case Management

The core function of social work in improving elderly mental health is case management, ensuring comprehensive, personalized assistance through needs analysis, planning, and resource integration. Social workers use questionnaires, dialogues, observations, and tools like the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) and Life Satisfaction Scale (SWLS) for assessments. These cover physical, mental health, and social support needs, including chronic conditions, functioning, self-care, emotional status, cognition, sleep, family, social networks, and community involvement. Based on evaluations, social workers set goals like mood improvement, quality of life enhancement, and community integration, and create modules such as counseling, health education, and community activities. They integrate resources from medical, community, NGOs, and volunteers, periodically review service effectiveness, adjust content and methods, and gather feedback from elderly and relatives to improve strategies.

4.2. Psychological Counseling and Counseling

Psychological counseling and counseling constitute the core of social work intervention strategies and play an indispensable role in improving the psychological well-being of the elderly group. Social workers focus on optimizing the mental health of the elderly by addressing widespread mental distress and teaching them adaptive coping strategies. For depression symptoms, social workers use structured assessment tools and in-depth interviews to identify signs of depression in elderly individuals, and apply cognitive reconstruction and psychodynamic therapy, which can challenge and change the negative cognitive mode of the elderly, so as to improve their emotional state. In dealing with anxiety, social workers use anxiety scales and case interviews to identify and relieve stress caused by anxiety.

Possible countermeasures include guided relaxation exercises and mindfulness practices, which can create a calmer mind for the elderly. As for the elimination of loneliness, social workers will use appropriate scales and clinical counseling to locate the elderly's loneliness experience, and then plan community gatherings to strengthen their social support structures and provide emotional comfort. Social workers also teach seniors self-care techniques, such as deep breathing and emotional regulation strategies like meditation, as well as problem-solving skills to help them deal more effectively with stressors in their lives. In the teaching of interpersonal interaction, social workers hope to improve the communication effectiveness of the elderly, repair and maintain family relations, promote their active participation in community affairs, and further enhance the sense of social connection and self-worth.

4.3. Community Activities and Support Network Building

Community interaction and support network construction are key social work strategies for elderly mental health. Social workers use these to foster engagement, provide solace, and boost the elderly's sense of belonging and self-worth. Through planned initiatives, they organize cultural activities like art performances and craft workshops, and promote health with tai chi, square dancing, and hiking. They encourage volunteer service to reignite purpose and establish interest groups for learning and camaraderie. Mental health support groups strengthen resilience, while social workers provide emotional support, resolve family conflicts, and coach care skills. Regular volunteer visits and a comprehensive community assistance network ensure elderly needs are met, enhancing psychological well-being. This approach improves quality of life and happiness, fostering a supportive and inclusive community for older members.

4.4. Successful Experience and Problems

A "retirement center" has been built in a residential area of Shanghai, which focuses on providing a variety of care programs, including home care, day care and temporary care, to elderly people over the age of 60, especially those living alone and those with partial disabilities. A Beijing district launched a "Home Assistance Project" for those over 60, especially those with mobility issues and special needs, offering food delivery, sanitation, medical services, and emergency response. Guangzhou established a "Mental Health Service Center" to provide psychological assessment, counseling, and intervention to elderly over 60, focusing on those with poor mental health. Aged care agencies in three cities conducted assessments of elderly needs in physical health, mental health, and social support through questionnaires and interviews. Based on the assessment's insights, they designed individualized assistance programs that included a variety of interventions, including day care, respite care, and health counseling services. Then they mobilized all kinds of resources in the community, such as medical institutions, non-governmental organizations, volunteer teams, etc., in order to achieve full support. Community service agencies collaborate closely with medical, social security, and relevant departments to boost service efficiency. They establish information-sharing hubs to facilitate departmental communication, enhancing service effectiveness and encouraging NGOs, volunteer groups, and the charity sector to actively participate in elderly mental health support.

Through the investigation of three cities, we found several challenges in the field of mental health of the elderly population. The existing assistance mechanisms are inadequate, and the shortage of professional psychological counseling and social work talents significantly restricts the response to the comprehensive needs of the silver population. At the same time, the phenomenon of social cognitive gap is prominent, and some elderly groups' understanding and acceptance of mental health are relatively lagging, which hinders their possibility of actively seeking psychological support. Therefore, it is urgent to build synergies between multiple sectors, such as community building, the integration of health systems and social safety nets, in order to improve service performance and build consensus. Through measures such as increasing service points and optimizing service processes, we will expand service coverage to ensure that more elderly people benefit. Strengthen the training of

service personnel, improve professional quality and service quality. Through publicity and education, raise social awareness of mental health problems of the elderly and encourage the elderly to seek help.

5. CONCLUSION

Through literature review, policy analysis, case analysis and other methods, this study systematically discusses the synergistic effect of social work and elderly policy in promoting mental health of the elderly and its effective path. The study found that case management, psychological counseling and consultation, community activities and support network construction have significant effects on improving the mental health of the elderly. However, problems such as insufficient policy support, lack of professionals, and social cognitive bias still exist. Therefore, this study proposes a strategy to strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration, including advocating the establishment of sound policy and regulatory frameworks to expand the field of care, in order to influence the exploration path of the future academia. This paper hopes to take this research as an opportunity to make substantial contributions to the theoretical foundation and practical guidelines for promoting the mental health of the elderly population, and further spare no effort to build a harmonious and inclusive social environment.

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