

# PROMOTING THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER PEOPLE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK

**Mădălina-Ioana RAȚIU**

PhD student, „Babeș-Bolyai” University from Cluj-Napoca (Romania)

E-mail: [madalina.ratiu@ubbcluj.ro](mailto:madalina.ratiu@ubbcluj.ro)

**Abstract:** *This paper addresses the contribution of social work programs to the well-being of older people. Well-being is a complex phenomenon, dependent on the simultaneous interaction of several factors, such as personal, cognitive, emotional, social, and other factors. It was found that the level of well-being is higher in elderlies who do not feel alone and have enough opportunities for communication, who actively participate in social life and live with their family. In addition, social work plays an important role in promoting the well-being of the elderly by offering support, protection and by facilitating access to various types of services, activities or therapies that add value to their quality of life.*

**Keywords:** social work, state of well-being, elderly.

## 1. Introduction

We are currently facing the challenge of an aging population and need to adapt to ensure the quality of elderlies' life. Even though we live longer, we are not always happier (Chong, 2007: 4). Suicide rates among the elderly are the highest, and many seniors feel lonely or separated from loved ones.

The role of social workers is to help transform society into a more compassionate world for older people. They must be in touch with their needs and aspirations, empower them and promote intergenerational harmony. Through the exchange of experiences and good practices, a supportive environment can be created for the elderly, suggests the previously mentioned author.

There are three types of main objectives of social work interventions for the elderly: ameliorative, preventive and developmental (Suneetha & Babu, 2015: 5). To overcome economic problems and benefit from adequate social support, older people could start a second career that suits them and is in line with their interests. Just as people's lives are usually about planning, old age should not be either neglected from this point of view, but on the contrary, measures should be developed to overcome the stress caused by economic, social and psychological problems often associated with retirement/old age, note the aforementioned authors. Social work helps older people form task-oriented groups, occupational groups, recreation groups, help groups or support groups that usually start with a few older people meeting in the community. " The social worker acts as a facilitator in the effective functioning of the organisations by conducting regular meetings, discussions on mutual interest subjects, lectures on health issues, cultural programmes, training in arts and crafts, discussions on local issues, celebrating religious and national festivals, arranging visits to the homes of the fellow aged, whose mobility is restricted due to ill-health, etc. These programmes make the elderly get a feeling of security and helps in better wellbeing.", Suneetha and Babu, (2015: 5) point out.

## 2. Factors influencing the well-being of the elderly

In general, well-being is a construct made up of a number of elements that must merge and function concurrently to bring this well-being complex phenomenon to fruition. In the specialized literature we often find well-being associated with a feeling of satisfaction with the quality of life, personal fulfilment, joy and even the feeling of a life lived with meaning and purpose.

From a psychological point of view, "well-being is associated with the phenomena of self-actualization, personal growth and fulfilment", but well-being is also influenced by the

person's level of cognitive functioning, emotional stability and psychological well-being that person has (Kovalenko & Spivak, 2018: 1).

It seems that older people who have an active social life, who are not alone but live with their family, who are open to various experiences, who carry out activities that are meaningful to them or to those around them, have a higher level of well-being (Kovalenko & Spivak, 2018: 2). Therefore, the well-being of the elderly is also influenced by access to social and family networks, support and assistance from these networks, access to health services, access to quality social services that adequately respond to the beneficiaries' needs (Ghența et al., 2022: 14).

Hillerås et al. (2001: 3) find in the specialized literature that the state of happiness and the activities practiced among older people can influence their level of well-being. Moreover, the authors highlight that the participation of the elderly in recreational activities with friends and family is the most common factor that induces a state of well-being.

However, Ghența et al. (2022: 2-3) note in relation to quality of life that it differs between elderly people living in communities and those in institutional care. The former gives greater importance to social integration, while the latter focus on the quality of the surrounding environment. Additionally, for older people in institutional settings, significant priorities include control over their lives, structure of the day, sense of self, activities, and relationships with staff and other residents.

### **3. Social work of the elderly**

The practice of social work with the elderly involves an exciting, challenging, but also rewarding field of work. At the same time, this practice requires high skills and detailed knowledge of the issues that affect the lives of older people (Hughes, 2020).

Working as a social worker with the elderly means coming into contact with the unique needs of each beneficiary, stemming from their unique environment and requiring individualized solutions. One of the goals of social work is to provide the recipient with the opportunity to continue to develop and change, and this process is a long-term one that requires acceptance. Social workers concerned with the problems of aging need to address the barriers to change, Brearley (2023) argues. Social work aims to help the beneficiary to discover which patterns from the past can be identified in the present, a fact that facilitates the acceptance of the present and even of death, notes the author.

On the other hand, the social work field has considerable potential to engage older people in a wide range of intervention programs, such as social action, family therapy, relationship counselling, trauma counselling, and conflict mediation (Hughes, 2020).

Social workers are an integral part of the process of making assessments of older people's ability to manage themselves at home, the nature and extent of care support they need, and the contributions needed from family or other carers (Lymbery, 2005). In cases where the problems faced by the elderly come from deteriorating physical health, social workers must have a general understanding of the causes and effects of the conditions that lead to these problems (Lymbery, 2005). The same is the case with cognitive problems, and among the most common problems faced by social workers among the elderly are dementia and depression, which are complex conditions, caused by an accumulation of factors that manifest simultaneously.

In addition to the physiological and psychological aspects that social workers have to take care of when it comes to the elderly, they are also responsible for protecting the elderly and providing a safe space for those who have been victims of abuse. Furthermore, social workers must manage investigative processes in cases where the safety of abused elders is threatened and ensure that they can maintain their autonomy (Lymbery, 2005).

### **4. Perspectives on the involvement of social workers in promoting the well-being of the elderly**

The mission of social workers is to face conflicts and challenges in order to achieve the goals of improving the life quality of the elderly. In practical contexts, there are ways in which they can move towards achieving these goals (Tanner, 2005: 14). First, they can begin by understanding the lives of beneficiaries as prerequisites for assessing the services they would need, in terms of support and resources appropriate to their needs. When older people experience difficulties, the consequences for their social roles, relationships and activities need to be explored. The support options provided by social workers should help them maintain roles and activities that are meaningful to them and respect their preferences for relational boundaries and the desire for reciprocity (Tanner, 2005: 14).

Social services for the elderly in Romania have undergone significant transformations in recent years, in response to the European Union's increased interest in the phenomenon of aging and its social and economic impact. The major changes were motivated by the need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the social work system, as demographic changes put pressure on the social protection system and require balanced solutions to meet both the expectations of the elderly and the limits of the public budget. In this context, Romanian long-term care policy should focus on creating an enabling environment for older people, in line with the call for a positive concept of aging, promoting active and healthy aging by optimizing health, encouraging inclusion and facilitating well-being during old age, highlights Chirugu (2023: 7-10).

According to the study "Impact of Health and Psycho-Social Status on Wellbeing of Elderly: Need for Social Work Intervention" developed by Suneetha and Babu in 2015 in India, it was observed that most of the elderly do not participate in social activities and fall into young-old age group. Moreover, they do not use their free time in a useful way. Furthermore, the study indicated that there is a significant association between psychosocial changes and the health status of older people and vice versa, influencing their well-being. Even though the aging process cannot be stopped, being aware of the changes and adopting a healthy lifestyle can reduce their impact on well-being. The authors draw the attention of social workers that it is essential that they provide support in terms of nutritional counseling, information about social services, preventive measures, recreational activities, suggestions about financial support systems, measures to improve family dynamics, creating awareness about stress reduction and adjustment.

In Nigerian society, most of the elderly are primarily cared for by the family, reflecting one of its traditional roles. Participants in the study conducted by Omosefe and Mukhtar (2023) feel an improvement in psychosocial well-being when they receive support from family, friends and neighbors. However, research indicates that low emotional support from family, including emotional abuse, can negatively affect the psychosocial well-being of older people. Social work practice among the elderly in Nigeria aims to improve their quality of life and promote their independence and dignity. The purpose of social workers in Nigeria is to work closely with the family and oppose the concept of *ageism*, advocating respect for the right to self-determination regardless of age. They work in solidarity with other professionals to combat the social conditions that contribute to the exclusion and stigmatization of older people, with the aim of building an inclusive society.

Therefore, social work, integrated within the national social protection system, encompasses both social services and social benefits granted in order to develop individual or collective capacities, with the aim of satisfying social needs, improving the quality of life and promoting the principles of social cohesion and inclusion. At the same time, social work intervention aims to support people in difficulty in obtaining the necessary conditions for a dignified life, facilitating the development of their own individual capacities and skills (Enache, 2019).

## 5. Discussions and openings

Studies show that older people are not always as happy as life satisfaction measurements suggest. Suicide rates among the elderly are the highest of all age groups in most parts of the world (Chong, 2007: 17-18). From a social health perspective, a significant number of older people are single, divorced or separated, and this trend is likely to become even more pronounced in the future. In this context, it is highlighted that social workers have a very important responsibility, that of contributing to the creation of a compassionate world for the elderly. As providers of social services, social workers are in a good strategic position to understand the needs and aspirations of older people, to encourage and support them, but also to promote intergenerational harmony. In addition, social workers must explore the causes that negatively affect the psychosocial health status of the elderly and propose preventive measures.

As future directions, it is desirable that social workers step forward and engage in different levels of intervention, from the level of individual cases to the level of national and international policies, which optimize the provision of social services for the elderly. Moreover, research in the field could highlight the need to popularize more experiences and good practices in the provision of social services for the elderly. Furthermore, information about the needs and expectations of older people should increasingly be a concern of social work research in order to create an open, supportive environment for these professionals.

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