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Healthy Ageing: The Importance of Self-Care Across the Life Course

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Abstract

Healthy ageing is a lifelong process shaped by biological, behavioural, social, environmental, and healthcare-related factors. Although ageing is frequently associated with older adulthood, the conditions that influence health and functional capacity in later life are established throughout the entire life course. Within this perspective, self-care represents an important strategy for promoting health, preventing avoidable diseases, maintaining functional capacity, and strengthening autonomy. This academic essay discusses the importance of self-care across different stages of life and its contribution to healthy ageing. Particular attention is given to physical activity, nutrition, sleep, mental health, social relationships, prevention, health literacy, chronic disease management, and access to supportive environments. Self-care is understood not as an individual obligation, but as a shared process influenced by families, communities, health professionals, health systems, and public policies. Promoting self-care throughout life can contribute to greater autonomy, functional ability, participation, quality of life, and well-being in older age. Healthy ageing should therefore be understood as a collective and lifelong public health commitment.

Keywords: Healthy ageing; Self-care; Life course; Health promotion; Functional ability.

1. Introduction

Population ageing represents one of the most important demographic transformations of contemporary societies. Increasing life expectancy, declining fertility rates, and improvements in living conditions have resulted in a growing proportion of older people worldwide. This transformation creates important opportunities, but it also requires health systems and societies to reconsider how health, prevention, independence, and social participation are understood. Ageing should not be approached exclusively as a period of biological decline or increasing dependency, but as a stage of life that can include autonomy, participation, productivity, relationships, learning, and well-being.

Healthy ageing is consequently a broader concept than the absence of disease. It concerns the ability of individuals to maintain capacities that allow them to live according to their values, needs, and preferences. Physical and mental capacities interact continuously with social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions. Two individuals of the same chronological age may therefore experience ageing in very different ways. Their trajectories reflect accumulated experiences and opportunities throughout life, including education, nutrition, physical activity,

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employment, income, housing, social relationships, exposure to risks, and access to healthcare.

Within this context, self-care becomes an important element of health promotion. Self-care includes the everyday actions through which people maintain their health, prevent illness, manage existing conditions, recognize changes in their health status, and seek professional assistance when necessary. It may include healthy eating, physical activity, adequate sleep, emotional regulation, social participation, medication management, preventive care, and appropriate use of health services. These behaviours are not isolated actions but components of a broader capacity to make informed decisions and participate actively in one's own health.

The importance of self-care becomes particularly evident when ageing is considered from a life-course perspective. Healthy ageing does not begin at retirement or at a predetermined chronological threshold. The foundations of health in later life are progressively established during childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and midlife. Behavioural patterns, social conditions, educational opportunities, occupational exposures, and access to health-promoting resources accumulate over time and influence subsequent health trajectories. Consequently, interventions designed to promote healthy ageing should begin long before old age.

At the same time, self-care should not be interpreted as an individual responsibility disconnected from social determinants. Individuals make choices within environments that can either facilitate or restrict healthy behaviours. Poverty, social inequality, inadequate housing, unsafe neighbourhoods, limited access to nutritious food, insufficient transportation, low health literacy, and barriers to healthcare can significantly affect people's capacity to care for themselves. A public health approach to self-care must therefore combine individual empowerment with social protection, accessible health systems, supportive communities, and equitable public policies.

The objective of this academic essay is to discuss the importance of self-care in promoting healthy ageing throughout the life course. The discussion considers self-care as a multidimensional process involving physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and preventive dimensions. It also emphasizes the shared responsibility of individuals, families, communities, health professionals, and governments in creating the conditions necessary for people to age with autonomy, dignity, participation, and quality of life.

2. Methods

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This study is presented as an academic essay based on a narrative and critical examination of scientific and institutional literature addressing healthy ageing, self-care, health promotion, functional ability, life-course approaches, chronic disease prevention, and determinants of health. The theoretical discussion was constructed using scientific articles, systematic reviews, international guidelines, and reports from recognized organizations, with emphasis on contemporary evidence and internationally established frameworks concerning ageing and health.

The essay does not present original empirical data and does not constitute a systematic review. Its purpose is conceptual and argumentative, seeking to integrate different dimensions of self-care into a broader understanding of healthy ageing. The references used to support the theoretical discussion are presented exclusively at the end of the text, allowing the essay to maintain a continuous argumentative structure without in-text citations.

3. Development

Healthy ageing should first be understood as a continuous process rather than as an outcome that begins when individuals become older. The human body and mind change throughout life, and these changes are influenced by genetic characteristics, behaviours, social relationships, living conditions, environmental exposures, and access to healthcare. Therefore, ageing successfully cannot be separated from the experiences accumulated during previous stages of life. A person entering older age carries a history of opportunities, risks, habits, resources, and social relationships that collectively influence their functional capacity.

A life-course perspective makes it possible to recognize that health inequalities accumulate over time. Educational opportunities during childhood can influence employment and income during adulthood, which in turn affect housing, nutrition, healthcare access, and the ability to adopt healthy behaviours. Similarly, prolonged exposure to occupational hazards, chronic stress, tobacco, harmful alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, or inadequate nutrition can produce consequences that become increasingly evident later in life. Healthy ageing therefore requires interventions that address risks and protective factors before functional limitations become established.

Self-care should be understood within this broader framework. It refers to the capacity of individuals to participate actively in maintaining and improving their health. It includes daily behaviours, decisions, monitoring practices, and the ability to recognize when professional assistance is necessary. Self-care is not synonymous with treating disease independently or replacing professional healthcare. Rather, it represents a complementary dimension of health that allows

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people to participate meaningfully in prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and the preservation of well-being.

The first dimension of self-care concerns physical activity. Regular movement is essential throughout the life course because it contributes to cardiovascular health, metabolic regulation, muscular strength, balance, mobility, and psychological well-being. Physical activity also plays an important role in reducing sedentary behaviour and maintaining functional capacity. Importantly, physical activity does not necessarily mean participation in structured sports. Walking, cycling, household activities, recreational activities, occupational movement, dancing, and exercises adapted to individual abilities can all contribute to a more active lifestyle.

The importance of physical activity becomes even greater with advancing age. Loss of muscle strength, balance, endurance, and mobility can compromise independence and increase the risk of falls. However, older adults can continue to benefit from physical activity even when functional capacity has already declined. Activities involving strength, balance, flexibility, and aerobic capacity can be adapted to different levels of ability. The objective is not to achieve athletic performance but to preserve the capacity to perform meaningful daily activities safely and independently.

Nutrition represents another fundamental component of self-care. Food provides the energy and nutrients necessary for maintaining body tissues, immune function, muscle mass, bone health, and cognitive functioning. Healthy eating habits established during childhood and adulthood can contribute to a lower risk of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic conditions. In later life, adequate nutrition becomes particularly important because physiological changes may increase vulnerability to malnutrition, loss of muscle mass, and functional decline.

The relationship between nutrition and healthy ageing is complex and should not be reduced to restrictive diets. Nutritional self-care should involve adequate quantity and quality of food, dietary diversity, hydration, and attention to individual needs. Older adults may face difficulties related to dental health, appetite, medication use, mobility, social isolation, and financial resources. Consequently, nutritional recommendations must be realistic and culturally appropriate. Promoting healthy eating requires attention not only to individual knowledge but also to food availability, affordability, household conditions, and social support.

Sleep is another important but frequently neglected component of self-care. Adequate sleep contributes to emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, physical recovery, metabolic health, and general well-being. Although sleep patterns naturally change with age, persistent sleep difficulties should not simply be accepted as an inevitable consequence of growing older. Sleep hygiene, regular routines, physical activity, exposure to natural light, appropriate management of

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stimulating substances, and adequate sleeping environments may contribute to better sleep quality.

Mental health should occupy an equally important position in strategies for healthy ageing. Psychological well-being is influenced by relationships, social participation, sense of purpose, financial security, physical health, and the ability to cope with life transitions. Self-care in mental health can include maintaining meaningful activities, recognizing emotional distress, cultivating social connections, developing strategies for managing stress, and seeking professional assistance when necessary. These practices are relevant not only in older age but throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Life transitions can significantly influence psychological health. Adolescence, entry into employment, parenthood, retirement, bereavement, changes in family structure, chronic illness, and loss of physical capacity may require individuals to adapt to new circumstances. The ability to recognize and respond constructively to these transitions can contribute to resilience across the life course. Healthy ageing therefore requires the development of psychological resources long before older adulthood.

Social relationships constitute another fundamental dimension of self-care. Human beings depend on relationships for emotional support, communication, identity, belonging, and practical assistance. Family relationships, friendships, professional networks, community activities, volunteering, cultural participation, and intergenerational interactions can protect well-being and provide meaning throughout life. Social participation is particularly important in later life, when retirement, bereavement, disability, and changes in mobility may reduce opportunities for interaction.

Loneliness and social isolation have increasingly been recognized as important public health concerns. The absence of meaningful relationships can negatively affect psychological well-being and may also influence physical health and health behaviours. Preventing social isolation therefore requires more than encouraging individuals to be socially active. Communities need spaces, programs, transportation, cultural activities, and public environments that make social participation accessible. In this sense, social self-care is simultaneously an individual and collective responsibility.

Health literacy is another essential component of self-care. People need to be able to understand health information, evaluate recommendations, communicate with professionals, make decisions, and navigate health services. As individuals age, they may encounter increasingly complex healthcare systems, multiple medications, different specialists, and several recommendations. Without adequate health literacy, even individuals who are highly motivated to care for themselves may struggle to manage their health effectively.

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Health professionals therefore have an important responsibility to make self-care feasible. Communication should be clear, accessible, respectful, and adapted to individual needs. Professionals should avoid assuming that providing information automatically results in understanding or behavioural change. Effective health education involves dialogue, recognition of barriers, shared decision-making, and the development of realistic goals. This approach strengthens autonomy rather than transforming health promotion into a list of obligations imposed on patients.

Preventive healthcare is another central component of self-care. Vaccination, appropriate screening, dental care, vision and hearing assessment, blood pressure monitoring, and regular evaluation of risk factors can contribute to early detection and prevention of complications. Preventive care is particularly important because many chronic diseases develop gradually and may remain asymptomatic for considerable periods. Nevertheless, prevention should be evidence-based and individualized, avoiding unnecessary medicalization of normal ageing.

Chronic disease management illustrates the importance of combining self-care with professional healthcare. Conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, respiratory diseases, and musculoskeletal disorders frequently require continuous attention outside clinical settings. Individuals may need to modify their diet, remain physically active, monitor symptoms, use medications correctly, and recognize warning signs. These actions are more effective when supported by continuous relationships with primary healthcare professionals.

Medication management becomes increasingly relevant when multimorbidity develops. Older adults may use several medications prescribed by different professionals, creating challenges related to schedules, interactions, adverse effects, and adherence. Self-care in this context should involve understanding the purpose and correct use of medications and communicating difficulties to healthcare professionals. It should never be interpreted as authorization to independently modify prescribed treatments without appropriate clinical guidance.

Cognitive health is also closely related to lifelong self-care. Cognitive functioning is influenced by multiple factors, including physical activity, sleep, cardiovascular health, education, social interaction, mental stimulation, and psychological well-being. Learning new skills, reading, participating in cultural activities, maintaining social relationships, and engaging in meaningful intellectual activities can contribute to cognitive engagement. Such activities should be accessible throughout life rather than being introduced only when cognitive decline becomes a concern.

The concept of meaningful ageing is particularly important in this context. Health should not be measured exclusively through biomedical indicators. People may define a good life through relationships, family responsibilities, professional

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activities, artistic interests, spirituality, education, volunteering, community participation, or independence in everyday activities. Self-care should therefore be connected to personal values and goals. The purpose of maintaining health is ultimately to enable people to live lives that they consider meaningful.

Families can play an important role in supporting self-care. Eating habits, physical activity, healthcare-seeking behaviours, emotional support, and attitudes toward ageing are often influenced by family dynamics. Families can facilitate healthy behaviours by creating supportive routines and helping individuals access services when necessary. However, support should not become excessive control. Older adults should remain involved in decisions concerning their health and daily lives whenever they are able to do so.

Communities also influence the ability to age healthily. Safe neighbourhoods, accessible transportation, public parks, community centres, libraries, cultural facilities, and age-friendly housing can facilitate participation and independence. Conversely, inaccessible environments can transform relatively minor functional limitations into major restrictions on daily life. Healthy ageing therefore requires communities that are designed to accommodate different levels of ability and promote interaction between generations.

Primary healthcare has a particularly important role in this process. Primary care services are often the main point of contact between individuals, families, and health systems. They can provide health promotion, prevention, vaccination, chronic disease management, mental health support, medication review, rehabilitation, and coordination with other services. A strong primary healthcare system can therefore transform self-care from an isolated individual practice into an ongoing process supported by professionals and communities.

Digital technologies create new possibilities for self-care but also introduce new inequalities. Mobile applications, telehealth, electronic health records, wearable devices, and online health information can help individuals monitor health and communicate with professionals. However, access to technology, digital literacy, disability, socioeconomic conditions, and concerns about privacy can affect who benefits from digital health resources. Digital self-care should therefore complement rather than replace accessible face-to-face services.

The social determinants of health must remain central to any discussion of self-care. It is unrealistic to expect individuals to adopt healthy behaviours when they lack the resources necessary to do so. A person cannot easily maintain a healthy diet without access to affordable nutritious food, nor can someone safely engage in physical activity when their neighbourhood is unsafe or inaccessible. Similarly, adherence to treatment may be compromised by transportation difficulties, financial barriers, or fragmented health services.

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This observation demonstrates why self-care should not become a mechanism for transferring responsibility from institutions to individuals. Public policies have an essential role in creating the conditions in which self-care becomes possible. Health systems must provide accessible and coordinated services, communities must promote participation, workplaces must support health, schools must develop health literacy, and governments must address social inequalities. Individual responsibility and collective responsibility should therefore be understood as complementary rather than competing principles.

Healthy ageing also requires combating ageism. Negative stereotypes about older people can affect expectations regarding physical activity, employment, sexuality, learning, social participation, and healthcare. When ageing is automatically associated with dependency and decline, individuals may internalize these expectations and reduce their participation. A positive approach recognizes diversity among older adults and emphasizes their capacities, rights, preferences, and contributions to families and communities.

Self-care should consequently be promoted as a lifelong culture rather than a set of recommendations directed exclusively at older adults. Children can learn healthy routines and emotional regulation. Adolescents can develop health literacy and responsible behaviours. Adults can strengthen physical activity, nutrition, sleep, mental health, and preventive practices. Older adults can continue these practices while adapting them to changing capacities and circumstances. At every stage, the objective is to preserve and strengthen the resources necessary for well-being.

Finally, healthy ageing should be understood as a shared societal project. Longer lives represent one of the great achievements of modern societies, but additional years of life should be accompanied by opportunities for autonomy, participation, health, and dignity. Self-care contributes to this objective by strengthening individuals' capacity to participate actively in their own health. However, its success depends on supportive families, communities, professionals, health systems, and public policies. A society committed to healthy ageing must therefore begin promoting self-care long before old age and continue supporting it throughout the entire life course.

4. Conclusion

Healthy ageing is not a condition that suddenly emerges in old age, but the result of a lifelong process involving physical, psychological, cognitive, social, environmental, and socioeconomic dimensions. Self-care represents an important component of this process because it enables individuals to participate actively in maintaining health, preventing avoidable conditions, managing chronic diseases, preserving functional capacity, and sustaining meaningful relationships. Physical

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activity, adequate nutrition, quality sleep, mental health, health literacy, preventive care, and social participation should therefore be understood as interconnected elements of a lifelong strategy rather than isolated recommendations.

Nevertheless, self-care cannot be reduced to individual responsibility. The capacity to care for oneself depends strongly on the environments and resources available to individuals throughout their lives. Healthy ageing requires equitable health systems, strong primary care, supportive communities, accessible environments, social protection, and policies that address the determinants of health. Promoting self-care from childhood through older adulthood can strengthen autonomy and functional ability while reducing avoidable inequalities. Ultimately, healthy ageing should be understood as a collective commitment to ensure that longer lives are accompanied by dignity, participation, independence, and quality of life.

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