

## Spiritual education and successful aging: A spiritual dialogue

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**Abstract:** Most people endeavor to prolong their lives and hope for a healthy old age, indicating that successful aging is extremely important for older adults. This article explored how spiritual education can enhance successful aging for older adults and develop a spiritual dialogue between them. The researchers used documentary analysis methods to analyze the successful aging methods for older adults. The successful aging methods outlined for older adults are as follows: (1) developing a sense of meaning and purpose; (2) making sense of life experiences; (3) emphasizing the importance of connection; (4) enhancing resilience; (5) enhancing life satisfaction; (6) encouraging a holistic view of well-being. The discussion in this article can expand approaches to successful aging methods for older adults.

**Keywords:** Active aging, Aging, Spiritual education, Spirituality, Successful aging.

### 1. Introduction

Aging has garnered increasing attention as life expectancy rises and the global population continues to grow. Aging causes the reduction in physical and physiological strength and an increase in the odds of affliction with chronic physical and mental diseases ultimately affecting the quality of life (QoL) (Faraji, Khalily, Naghibzadeh, Kazemina, Kazemina, 2023).

In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined “active aging” as improving quality of life and promoting health, social participation, and safety for older adults. The concept of "active aging" is a response to the demographic challenges facing the world today, which require adjustments to healthcare systems, social policy, and community structures. The WHO's *Active Aging: A Policy Framework* (2002) provides a holistic approach to addressing these challenges. Core components of active aging include (1) successful aging, which involves maintaining physical and mental well-being, engaging in life, and minimizing disease and disability risk and emphasizes adaptability, resilience, and lifelong learning; (2) healthy aging, which is centered on maintaining health and functional abilities, including preventive measures to delay illness onset and promote wellness; and (3) productive aging, which encourages older adults to remain engaged in economic and non-economic activities such as work, volunteering, caregiving, and civic participation, thus ensuring they contribute to society and stay mentally and physically active. The active aging framework advocates for creating environments that support older adults' independence and active participation in society, recognizing that integrating healthcare with social policy enables older adults to maintain dignity, autonomy, and a good quality of life. The relationship between spirituality and successful aging in particular warrants further study. Successful aging involves not only physical health and psychological well-being but also spiritual growth and fulfillment. Beyond religious beliefs, spirituality can include ideas about the meaning of life, sense of purpose, and inner peace (Bar-Tur, 2021; McManus, 2024; Shih, 2022; Thauvoye, Vanhooren, Vandenhoeck, et al., 2018; World Health Organization, 2002). This article details how spiritual education can enhance successful aging for older adults.

## 2. Research Method

Documentary analysis is research which involves documents as the data. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give meaning on a topic (Aimee Grant, 2022; Bowen, 2009; Wang, & Shih, 2022, 2023). The researchers used documentary analysis documentary analysis methods to analyze the successful aging methods for older adults.

## 3. Conceptual Analysis

### 3.1. Spirituality

Whether you were raised with a religious upbringing or tend to feel that "spirituality" is a gimmick used by New Age wellness influencers, you've probably found yourself wondering if there was something more. It might not be religion, per se, but you still might crave a deeper connection—to yourself, others, or the world in general. According to health experts, that connection can pay off in important ways for both your mind and body. Spirituality is a worldview that suggests a dimension to life beyond what we experience on the sensory and physical levels. In practice, this might entail religious or cultural practices and beliefs surrounding a higher being, connection with others and the world as a whole, and/or the pursuit of self-improvement (Scott, 2024). Although the concept of spirituality can be elusive, diverse, and sometimes ambiguous, some key themes are frequently found in the literature, for spirituality of people: including spirituality as a way of being and a form of relationality, identity, and connectedness. A holistic, integrated approach to education requires the inclusion of spirituality (John Chi-Kin Lee, 2020; Królikowska, 2024; Szymańska, 2024). In addition, as an increasing number of older adults live longer lives, there has been increased interest in including spirituality in the bio-psycho-social model of assessment and treatment of the problems they encounter (Langer, 2000). The role of spirituality in the health of older adults is gaining increasing attention. Research has shown that spiritual well-being contributes to enhancing life satisfaction and mental health among older adults, helping them adapt to various challenges in later life. In summary, spirituality, as a way of being, emphasizes a profound connection between the individual, the self, others, and the world, holding significant importance for physical and mental health as well as educational development (Hung, 2012; Scott, 2024).

### 3.2. Spiritual Education

Whereas spiritual education has typically been considered a generally positive but largely ornamental feature of human life, the researchers emphasize the importance of spiritual education to both individual and societal development. Spiritual approaches to education emphasize the development of one's inner self, sense of meaning, connection with others, and relationship with something greater than oneself—whether that be nature, a higher power, or a sense of collective humanity—and involve nurturing compassion, empathy, mindfulness, and a deep sense of purpose. Key elements of spiritual education include (1) connection to meaning and purpose, helping individuals explore questions regarding the purpose and meaning of life and their role in the world, which can guide them toward living with intention and a sense of fulfillment; (2) fostering compassion and empathy through moral and ethical development, encouraging students to practice kindness, compassion, and empathy toward others to foster a sense of social responsibility and respect for the interconnectedness of life; (3) mindfulness and self-awareness, which can include meditation and reflective activities that improve emotional regulation and deepen individuals' understanding of themselves; (4) encouraging inner peace, which contributes to emotional resilience and can guide students in managing stress, finding balance, and maintaining a healthy mental state; (5) cultural and religious literacy—although spiritual education can be secular, it often involves exploring diverse spiritual traditions and philosophies, which can promote cultural literacy and respect for different worldviews, fostering an inclusive and respectful environment—and (6) nurturing creativity and wonder, which encourages students to explore the mysteries of life and the beauty of the world (Brady, 2018; Hans Henning & Max Henning, 2021; Hung, 2012; Królikowska, 2024; Lin & Shih, 2024; Maria S. Berezhnaya, 2024; Thauvoye, Vanhooren, Vandenhoeck, et al., 2018).

### 3.3. Successful Aging

Growing old is a natural process experienced by all human beings, and as the global population ages, the World Health Organization has promoted healthy aging, active aging, and successful aging (Shih, Wu & Chung, 2022).

A growing body of research connects spirituality with positive late-life functioning. The transition from a bioscientific to holistic perspective on successful aging poses challenges to defining this concept. The holistic perspective includes the subjective aspects of aging. Research has shown that subjective factors, such as spirituality, religious practice, meditation, communal support, and purposeful living, may be as influential as genetic factors in diminishing age-related limitations among older adults (McManus, 2024; Shih, 2022; Thauvoye, Vanhooren, Vandenhoeck, et al., 2018). As a multifaceted concept encompassing physical, psychological, and social dimensions, successful aging includes: (1) physical health, including regular exercise, a balanced diet, proper medical care, and managing chronic conditions effectively; (2) mental and emotional well-being, including psychological resilience, emotional stability, the ability to cope with challenges, and engagement in activities that promote mental stimulation and emotional satisfaction; (3) social engagement, including staying socially active and connected with family, friends, and one's community to support emotional health and mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation; (4) sense of purpose, which can be achieved through work, volunteering, hobbies, or family involvement to improve overall well-being; (5) spirituality, which can provide individuals with a sense of meaning, connection, and inner peace; (6) adaptability to and acceptance of the aging process, which positively contributes to resilience and overall happiness; (7) lifelong learning and staying curious about the world, which promote cognitive function and a sense of vitality; and (8) preventive health measures, including regular health screenings, vaccinations, and proactive management of health issues. Each individual's experience of aging is unique, and successful aging can vary based on personal values, life experience, and cultural context (Hung, 2012; Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 1998; Shih, 2024; William, Margaret & Richard, 2002; Wojtek Chodzko-Zajko, Andiarra Schwingel & Chae Hee Park, 2008).

## 4. Connections Between Successful Aging and Spirituality in Older Adults

### 4.1. Meaning and Purpose in Life

Late life is still often characterized as a time of loss and decline. How to highlight the rich life experiences of older adults. Doing so created an opportunity to explore perspectives on sense of purpose in life, from the vantage point of old age. As people age, they often begin to search for meaning and purpose in life. Spiritual exploration can help older adults reflect on past experiences and find their place in the world, enabling them to face the challenges of aging, such as loss and health problems, and gain inner peace and fulfillment (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, 1998; Sharma & Bluck, 2022).

### 4.2. Inner Peace and Mental Health

Meditation, prayer, community religious activities, and other spiritual practices can help older adults maintain psychological balance and inner peace, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression and promoting emotional stability, which is crucial for successful aging (McManus, 2024). In addition, religion and spirituality are similar but not identical concepts. Religion is often viewed as more institutionally based, more structured, and involving more traditional activities, rituals and practices. Spirituality refers to the intangible and immaterial and thus may be considered a more general term, not associated with a particular group or organization. It can refer to feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors related to the soul or to a search for the sacred (Kaplan, 2024).

### 4.3. Interpersonal Relationships and Community Engagement

Spirituality often leads individuals to seek deeper connections with others. Through participation in religious or spiritual community activities, older adults can build and maintain meaningful relationships with others, providing a sense of support and belonging and reducing feelings of isolation and alienation (McManus, 2024; Nelson-Becker & Thomas, 2020).

#### 4.4. Attitude Towards Death

Stereotypes of old age can be both positive and negative, but it is the negative stereotypes that are more firmly embedded in society's beliefs and expectations of old age. They fall into categories such as mental and physical decline, ugliness, uselessness, isolation and poverty (Costa, 2024).

Spiritual beliefs and practices can help older adults adopt a positive and peaceful attitude towards death, which they may come to view as a natural part of life, alleviating fear and contributing to better mental health and quality of life in the later stages of life (Jiang, Lu, & Luo, et al., 2023; McManus, 2024).

#### 4.5. Satisfaction and Well-Being

Spirituality, including religious rituals and personal transcendence, offers older adults a framework for maintaining a positive outlook on life, enhancing satisfaction and well-being (Ilmi, McKenna, Murphy & Kadar, 2024; William., Margaret & Richard, 2002). Spirituality is often approached as a single measure in relation to well-being, neglecting its complex nature. Studies indicated that well-being was positively predicted by spirituality experienced through connectedness with the transcendent and through connectedness with others (Thauvoye, Vanhooren, Vandenhoeck, et al., 2018).

In summary, spirituality plays a crucial role in successful aging processes. Through spiritual growth, older adults can achieve more fulfilling states of physical and mental health, social connection, and inner peace, thereby promoting overall quality of life (Jiang, Lu, & Luo et al., 2023).

### 5. A Spiritual Dialogue: Successful Aging Methods from A Spiritual Education Perspective

The relationship between successful aging and spirituality has begun to gain attention in gerontology and psychology. Successful aging is often seen through a holistic lens, incorporating not only physical and psychological but also spiritual dimensions. Spirituality, which can encompass but is not limited to religious beliefs, plays a key role in how individuals find meaning, purpose, and peace as they age (McManus, 2024). Spiritual education contributes to successful aging in the following ways:

#### 5.1. Developing a Sense of Meaning and Purpose

For many older adults, reflecting on life can lead to a deeper understanding of their experiences and relationships, fostering a sense of fulfillment and meaning. Spirituality often provides a framework for interpreting life events and connecting with a larger purpose, which can enhance life satisfaction and resilience in the face of challenges, such as loss or physical decline (Euan Sadler & Simon Biggs, 2006).

#### 5.2. Making Sense of Life Experiences

Spiritual beliefs often provide narratives that help older adults make sense of their life experiences, including hardships and losses, which can lead to a greater acceptance of life events and promote a positive outlook (Euan Sadler & Simon Biggs, 2006).

#### 5.3. Emphasizing The Importance of Connection

Many spiritual traditions emphasize the importance of connection, whether with a higher power, nature, or community. A sense of connection can combat feelings of isolation and loneliness, fostering sense of belonging (Euan Sadler & Simon Biggs, 2006).

#### 5.4. Enhancing Resilience

Spirituality can enhance resilience by equipping individuals with coping strategies and a support network during challenging times, such as when facing health concerns or the loss of loved ones (Amanda Hiles Howard, Megan Roberts, Tony Mitchell and Nicole Gilbertson Wilke, 2023).

#### 5.5. Enhancing Life Satisfaction

Education seeks to cultivate moral individuals who live a lives of value and meaning and who have spiritual values. Engaging in spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, or community religious activities, can enhance overall life satisfaction by promoting a sense of peace and purpose, and enhance spiritual values (Shih, 2020; Wilkinson, & Coleman, 2010).

### *5.6. Encouraging a Holistic View of Well-Being*

The definition of health according to the World Health Organization is a “state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” The Anglo-Saxon word for health is *hāl*, also translated as “whole” or “wholeness.” Derived from its original meaning, health in the truest sense, therefore, implies a state of wholeness. Or as Ballantine (1999) states, “perhaps the simplest definition of healing is to make whole.” (Ballantine, 1999; shih, 2022; Steele, 2020). Spirituality often encourages a holistic view of well-being, encompassing emotional, mental, and physical health, which can be particularly beneficial as individuals face the complexities of aging (Wilkinson, & Coleman, 2010).

These aspects of spiritual education can deepen understanding of how spirituality influences the aging process, indicating a valuable direction for future research in gerontology, psychology, social work, and related fields. The present opinion piece included specific strategies and practices that can support spiritual well-being and successful aging among older adults.

## **6. Reflections and Conclusions**

### *6.1. Reflections*

As individuals grow older, the search for meaning and purpose becomes a central focus of their lives. Aging often brings significant challenges, such as coping with loss, declining health, and shifts in social roles. These experiences can lead older adults to reflect deeply on their past, re-evaluate their priorities, and seek a deeper understanding of their place in the world. Spiritual exploration serves as a powerful tool in this journey, enabling older adults to interpret their life experiences constructively and derive a sense of coherence and fulfillment. By fostering inner peace and resilience, spiritual practices can help them navigate the complexities of aging with grace. Whether through prayer, meditation, community engagement, or artistic expression, spiritual engagement offers a framework for addressing existential questions and finding joy and satisfaction in the present moment. Ultimately, cultivating a sense of meaning and purpose not only enhances older adults’ emotional well-being but also contributes to their overall quality of life, helping them approach aging as a stage of growth and self-discovery rather than decline (Shih, 2022; Wu, 2014, 2023; Zhu, Zhang, & Jiang, 2024).

### *6.2. Conclusions*

There was a radical increase in record human life expectancy during the 21th century. The 21st century has witnessed significant advances in life expectancy, but it is essential to clarify the concept of a "radical increase." While life expectancy has improved considerably over time, especially in specific regions, the rise during the 21st century is part of a steady trend driven by medical advancements, economic development, global efforts in health, etc (Jdanov & Jasilionis, 2024). However, opinions differ as to whether the increases in life expectancy seen in recent decades are a positive social development. Regardless, most people endeavor to prolong their lives and hope for a healthy old age (Costa, 2024), indicating that successful aging is extremely important for older adults. That article explored how spiritual education can enhance successful aging for older adults and develop a spiritual dialogue between them. The successful aging methods outlined for older adults are as follows: (1) developing a sense of meaning and purpose; (2) making sense of life experiences; (3) emphasizing the importance of connection; (4) enhancing resilience; and (5) enhancing life satisfaction; (6) encouraging a holistic view of well-being. These methods highlight the role of spirituality in enriching the aging process, offering actionable insights for older adults to navigate this stage of life with greater fulfillment. By integrating these approaches, the discussion broadens the scope of strategies available to support successful aging.

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