Positive aging: the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological, social and physical wellbeing

Abstract

Nowadays ageing in a healthy way is one of the greatest challenges of our era. There are several factors associated with the emotional functioning of an individual which are necessary for managing and regulating emotional life, such as perceiving and understanding emotions and being able to regulate them. Such abilities are well encompassed by the Emotional Intelligence (EI) construct. An impressive body of literature indicates that EI has a significant influence on psychological, social and physical health. However, to date, such evidence cannot be extended accurately to the older population as the vast majority of studies have been focused on samples composed of adolescents and young adults. Therefore the aim of the current review is to analyze what extent is linked to psychosocial and physical functioning among older people.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, older adults

Introduction

The management of emotions is a powerful predictor of psychological well-being and health during all periods of life. Although everyone experiences emotions, people clearly differ in the ways to which they deal with intrapersonal or interpersonal emotional information.1 Besides the individual differences in emotional management, studies conducted from a life course perspective indicate an affective stability and a high level of emotional wellbeing among older adults2,3 arguing therefore the importance of promoting positive emotional performance in older adults due to its potential benefit in their daily functioning.

Emotional intelligence in older people

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is recognized by numerous studies over the last decades to have a significant impact on psychological, social and physical adjustment.4 However most of those findings are related to young and middle aged samples and little is known about the association between EI and well-being among older people. Therefore, the aim of the current review is to summarize to what extent EI is linked to psychological, social and physical functioning among elderly.

EI construct encompassed the ability to perceive, to understand emotions and to be able to regulate them.5 Salovey & Mayer6 first proposed the term EI to refer to a set of interrelated skills that allow an individual to recognize, to comprehend, to use and control emotional episodes in an efficient and adaptive manner. Thereby they allow effective dealings with the environment. Further considerations of those authors’ suggested that EI meets a developmental criterion: EI develops with age and experience from childhood to early adulthood. For this reason, and may be because of that, of the study of emotional resources as a helpful skills in the aging process start much later. The vast majority of studies have focused on samples of adolescents and young adults. Actually more recent research on EI has extended the adult age range to include older adults. Those studies have found that elderly have significantly higher scores than young adults in EI.4,8,10 Meanwhile, according to Galdona12 EI is configured similarly in middle-aged adults (from 50 to 65 years old) and older adults (from 66 to 90 years old). The study revealed only age differences between young and middle aged adults, and between young and older adults. There were as well higher levels of EI among middle aged and older adults. This positive relationship between age and EI might be explained due to the lifelong learning the accumulated knowledge and experience acquired in life.13 Being EI considered as a powerful resource for the aging process due to the fact that it’s improve or remain stable with time. In the contrary there are some other aspects susceptible to decline with age such as physical health, income and cognitive capacities.14,15 Recent research has analyzed the relationship between EI and psychological, social and physical functioning among older adults. We conducted a non-systematic review. We used PubMed search terms including “elderly” or “older adults”, “health”, “wellbeing”, “social support” or “social functioning” and included publications selected based on knowledge generated from our research in this field as well as our experience from working with formal and informal caregivers. Some of the most interesting findings are summarized below.

Emotional intelligence and psychological functioning

The relationship between EI and psychological functioning has been analyzed in an important number of studies. These studies have indicated that EI is associated with a higher degree of life
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The results provided by different studies are discussed in the present review. They suggest a functional importance for studying EI in older adults, and a need to address this line of research more thoroughly. Thus, more research is needed to know the relationship between EI and diverse variables like psychological, social and physical functioning. A fact is that precisely EI can be improved and is trainable in older people.\textsuperscript{13,14} Psychological intervention programs should focused on training EI competence with a lifelong perspective due to the fact that when EI is enhanced through training, psychological, physical and social adjustment improve.\textsuperscript{35}

On the other hand, given the importance of emotional competencies in social interaction, future studies should also explore the relationship between EI and other variables such as social support and loneliness\textsuperscript{16} where scarce research has been found in regards to elderly.

Finally this review highlights the relevance of EI in psychological, social and physical health especially in older people. More emotionally intelligence seniors would contribute to healthier societies, in terms of well-being, quality of social relationships, as well as, less health care expenditures related to positive aging.

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Conflict of interest

Author declare that there is no conflict of interest in publishing the manuscript.

References


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