[**Elderly challenges**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758757/elderly-challenges)

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THE significance of older people has been recognised by the UN, which has declared 2021-2030 as the Decade of Healthy Ageing, seeking to lessen health inequities and “improve the lives of older people, their families and communities”. In 2020, the number of people aged 60 and older outnumbered children younger than five. Between 2015 and 2050, the proportion of the world’s population over 60 will nearly double from 12 per cent to 22pc.

According to UN estimates, by 2050, one out of six people in the world will be above the age of 65, up from one out of 11 in 2019. This indicates that, for the first time in history, older people will outnumber children below 14, says a British Council study. In 2050, two out of every three older persons will be residing in developing countries (UN, 2019). According to the British Council study, 7pc of the population (about 14 million) is over 60 in Pakistan, which is expected to reach 8.5pc and 12.9pc in 2030 and 2050 respectively.

What are the implications of these scenarios? The first is that more (older) people will need additional support, increasing dependency on younger ones, while they (the young) themselves are struggling to support their own families. Second, governments — already starved for resources — will face additional challenges to support this segment of their populations.

While the elderly’s challenges may be numerous, let us focus on three: a) physical health; b) mental and emotional health; and c) generation gap. Incremental health deterioration in old age is fairly common. Various health issues, such as blood pressure, diabetes, dementia, eyesight weakness, hearing loss, arthritis and urological complications trouble many elders. Besides, mental and emotional issues, such as dementia, tension, even depression, may affect their life quality.

Let us do all possible to look after our elders.

The second area seniors suffer has to do with emotional health. Emotional health issues, often less attended than physical, are triggered by many factors, such as loss of dear ones (for example, spouses), jobs or positions. Moreover, they generally lose their celebrated life engagements, particularly when they have enjoyed good jobs and meaningful careers.

The gap between the past and present becomes increasingly large, leading to loss of status. This experience then becomes almost incurable unless the seniors find alternative occupations. For example, I have been a university professor in a prestigious institute, worked in a senior position, and enjoyed a productive life. Now 72 and out of university, although I am living in a comfortable environment with relative ease, the loss of attention and affection I enjoyed is considerable.

The third area of seniors’ challenges has to do with the generation gap. As we grow older, our ideas are often less respected, or not even listened to, as they (ideas) are seen as ‘old-fashioned’. This inevitably leads to self-censorship, and culminates in reticence. The issue has been exacerbated particularly in the last 50 years due largely to fast-changing lifestyles, dominated by the technological, digital and knowledge revolution.

This (generation) gap is particularly pronounced with regard to bringing up grandchildren. Grandchildren develop highly emotional relations with their dada, dadi, nana and nani. When people ask me what I do nowadays, I jokingly say “Dada geeri”, because I am the dada of twin grandkids (a boy and a girl). I also say I do “Nana geeri” as well, as my daughter is blessed with a baby girl. Interacting with grandkids is sheer joy.

Still another fault line between the older and newer generation is the way both think of bringing up children. Grandparents’ way of bringing up kids in many areas tends to be different than their adult children’s. This often leads to tensions and conflict where grandparents feel devalued and defeated. These areas of conflict, however, can be lessened, if not done away with, simply by talking, exchanging ideas, and agreeing to disagree with mutual respect and empathy.

In sum, let us do everything possible to look after the elders at the individual, community and state level, ensuring their physical, emotional and social well-being. Indeed, the young ones are also going to join the elders; it is only a matter of time!

Finally, it is good to remind ourselves of Quranic advice to adult children of (older) parents. The Holy Quran says, “Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt [uffin], nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour. And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: ‘My Lord! bestow on them Thy Mercy even as they cherished me in childhood’” (17:23-24).

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