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**Active ageing**

Abraham Lincoln’s view that “it’s not the years in your life that count, it’s the life in your years” captures the essence of what contemporary active ageing is all about.

The World Health Organization defines active ageing as the “process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” and, at the beginning of this millennium, the WHO emphasized the role of active living and physical activity in improving the lives of older adults.

As the global older adult population grows, the health or ill health of the adult population is also a growing concern. One area of concern is that around 23 percent of older adults do not meet the WHO recommended standard for physical activity. The gravity of this statistic is realized when we see that the population of those 65 years and above in 2019 was estimated at over 700 million.

Physical activity and exercise, among other things, are quite important in active ageing. Physical activities can include brisk walking, riding a bicycle, working-out in the gym, and the playing of sports. In addition to these more exercise-oriented activities, active ageing can also involve everyday physical activities such as walking, climbing the stairs, gardening, etc.

Active ageing extends beyond just physical activity and exercise. It also involves participation in activities that are relaxing and enjoyable for an individual, such as playing board games, reading, writing, cooking, gardening, sightseeing, volunteering for a social cause, socializing with family and friends, etc.

Active ageing provides several benefits to older adults. In terms of the benefits of exercise, exercise can help build muscle, strengthen bones, and at the same time reduce the risk and impact of non-communicable chronic disease. Other kinds of active ageing activities make life more enjoyable and produce higher levels of happiness and help lower levels of depression. These activities can help delay dementia and Alzheimer’s disease in older adults.

From a specific health perspective, active ageing can help reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, arthritis, strokes, certain cancers, etc. Active living can also help in managing these chronic conditions more effectively. For instance, research in 1997 has shown that regular moderate physical activity reduced the risk of heart attack by up to 25 percent in those who were already suffering from some form of heart disease.

Active ageing can also reduce the risk of falls and help develop and maintain functional ability till much later in life. This functional ability can contribute significantly to mobility and independent living and help maintain and enhance dignity and thus contribute to a better overall quality of life for older adults.

The social environment can have consequences on the level of active ageing that older adults engage in and, consequently, on their overall health. The promotion of active ageing in society can be enhanced or inhibited by attitudes. Sometimes negative attitudes may include viewing participation in some active ageing activities as contrary to ageing ‘gracefully’. There may be prevailing attitudes that view older adults as ‘frail’ and incapable of engaging in moderately demanding physical activities. These ageist attitudes, even though they may be well-intentioned, may pose major hindrances to active ageing. Older adults themselves may also hold these attitudes, along with many in the younger aged population.

There is a need to be sensitive to the fact that within the older adult population there may be some sub-groups that are at a greater inclination towards sedentary lifestyles. For example, some research has shown that within the larger older adult population, people with lower incomes may be more prone to leading inactive lives.

Loneliness and social isolation can be very consequential factors in the social environment that older adults are facing. Active ageing, on the social front, can be weakened among older adults because of close relatives and friends passing away due to illness and old age. Loneliness and isolation can increase stress and contribute to a general decline in physical and emotional health.

The prevailing societal attitudes, along with affecting the social environments, will also affect the built physical environment. This physical environment is seen in houses, housing societies, towns and cities. Federal, provincial and municipal laws provide guidelines for planning and constructing houses, apartments, housing societies, towns and cities.

The physical infrastructure that can play a positive role in promoting active living includes sidewalks that encourage walking, neighborhood parks, safe cycling paths, accessible hiking trails, etc. The availability of publicly supported seniors’ centers can help provide a venue for older adults to congregate and conveniently benefit from organized activities.

To optimize the benefits of active ageing it is important to ensure the safety and security of older adults. There are certain physical activities which if undertaken in certain ways may pose health risks for older adults. The assessment of what physical activities may pose significant risks of injury or harm will vary from one individual to another, and appropriate qualified advice should be sought to clarify what activities can be safely undertaken by an individual older adult.

One recently emerged risk is the coronavirus pandemic. The older adult population is at a higher risk of suffering from the worst effects of Covid-19 and it is estimated that 80 percent Covid-19 deaths in the US have been in adults aged 65 and over. In terms of active living, it is important to realize that several physical and exercise activities can be done at home. Also, social media provides options for social interactions that are safer. However, in countries like Pakistan there are additional challenges for older adults on account of poverty and limited digital access.

Active ageing can definitely help promote further improved health among older adults. The improved life of older adults will contribute to better lives for the families and the communities in which the older adults live. The improved physical and mental health can also help extend the productive working life of older adults and thus contribute to economic development. Further, these improvements will provide benefits on a national scale with lower resource burdens on the public healthcare and social welfare systems.

Active ageing is important and there is a need to promote active ageing at the intrapersonal level, in the social environment and in the built physical environment. Unfortunately, there are no public policies that directly aim to promote active ageing in Pakistan. Perhaps, now is a good time to institute policies that promote active ageing since Prime Minister Imran Khan, who was once a world-class sportsman, is himself an older adult who is physically fit and lives a very active life.

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