

Mind how you go!

Psychology and Retirement

Ray Miller

Clinical and Health Psychologist

© 2011

Mind how you go...

Psychology

Psychology is usually described as the scientific study of mind and behaviour. It helps us understand how people work.

It explains how we develop and learn: how we understand ourselves, each other and the world we live in. It helps us look at the choices we make, how we make them and how we deal with the consequences. It tells us something about how we see, feel and experience life: about our thoughts, feelings, emotions and actions.

Much of psychology is concerned with 'normal' life and development. However it also sheds light on those times when we might not function quite so well: times of stress, anxiety or mental and physical ill health.

For most people, most of the time, retirement and later life is an enjoyable and fulfilling experience. But, retired or not, anyone can find that life is more difficult on occasions and a bit of extra knowledge or advice can help.

This leaflet contains no magic 'cures' or answers. You will already be aware of much of the content. However it can be handy to have a reminder close by when you need it and all the sections in here are backed by sound science.

Mind how you go...

Retirement

Retirement is a major life event and, good or bad, has a major psychological impact.

Work is not just about earning income. It is about who we are and how we, and others, see us. It provides purpose and structure to our time and may be where we make and share important relationships.

Even where we have a positive attitude to retirement, we can experience feelings of loss, disorientation and even depression. If you were not looking forward to retirement, it can also give rise to feelings of anger, rejection and worthlessness.

What's more, your feelings are likely to change over time based on your experience of retirement. It can be exciting or boring, fulfilling or empty, rewarding or soul destroying. Social attitudes to ageing can be unhelpful and there will be changes in your relationships and lifestyle.

Believe you have control

Psychology would say that you have a real opportunity to take control and steer your way through these changes to success and contentment. There will be downs as well as ups. Not everything will be under your control but you can certainly load the odds significantly in your favour.

Findings from studies of people in midlife suggest that those who believe they have greater control over their physical and cognitive (mental) health have better memory and intellectual functioning as they age.

Research has identified some common strategies. There is no one correct strategy. It is a matter of deciding which is right for you.

Mind how you go...

The main types of retirees are:

Continuers	who continue using existing skills and pursuing established interests;
Adventurers	who start planning and developing entirely new projects, skills and endeavours;
Searchers	who explore new options through multiple opportunities and trial and error;
Easy Gliders	who enjoy unscheduled time letting each day unfold;
Involved Spectators	who care deeply about the world, engaging in less active ways;
Retreaters	who take time out or disengage from life.

Of course, you don't have to choose just one approach. This is a mix and match exercise.

It can be helpful to start thinking about what you want to do and achieve. In the past you've probably been asked "How do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years time?" That question is just as relevant now. Keep a notebook for ideas that occur to you. Don't be too critical of the ideas. You can sort out how realistic they are later. This is about having dreams. After all, as the song says, if you never have a dream, how are you going to have a dream come true? Talk to family and friends about your goals and let a picture of where you are going in the future emerge.

Don't be put off by some of the myths about ageing

Older people can't learn new skills?

Your style of learning changes over time. As you age you learn more holistically; often seeing wider meaning and connections that may seem to make it harder to concentrate on a specific task and to make learning slower. This can actually be an asset in problem solving and decision making. It can also lead to learning being more thorough.

Mind how you go...

Older people can't remember?

Short term memory (remembering things in the last 30 minutes) does deteriorate slightly with age but often so slowly that it is hardly noticeable. On the other hand, long term memory is very stable. That means knowledge and skill gained over years remains useful and available. Including using skills you've learned to help you remember important information.

Older people lose their intelligence?

Broadly speaking, intelligence remains fairly constant throughout life. Although older people can be slower on some speed test measurements, they also make fewer mistakes. Valuing accuracy over speed can be an important asset.

Older people have nothing to offer today's world?

“Wisdom is the result of experience: unfortunately, much experience is the result of a lack of wisdom!” There is strong evidence that age brings an improved set of “Life Skills”. Most of us get much better at being able to manage our daily affairs. Older people tend to do better than younger people on tests that deal with practical activities. Perhaps some of that wisdom can help improve the experience of others.

Look after your physical health

This is a psychology leaflet but one thing research tells us is that a healthy mind needs a healthy body – and, indeed, the reverse is also true.

Your body is like any other machine. If not regularly maintained, it rusts and seizes up. That includes your brain.

You already know the main points:

being physically active
eating a healthy diet
not smoking

Mind how you go...

drinking alcohol only in moderation
practicing relaxation or stress-reduction techniques
sleeping well

It is very clear from the evidence that people who act on these points are more likely to experience feelings of self control, positive self esteem and accomplishment.

Physical activity doesn't just mean boring exercise. Most older people, no less than younger adults, find that it is important to keep or develop active interests, to stay (or become more) physically active generally, and to develop a regular structure to their day. Exercise does help though, even increasing the amount you walk on a regular basis. Blood supply to the brain is improved, so your mind works better as well as your body.

Eating well is key to feeling healthy, maintaining physical wellbeing, protecting against illness and reducing the risk of thinning bones and fractures. Regular eating patterns are important to keep well and to maintain energy levels. Missing meals or eating unhealthily can result in tiredness and depression and a greater sensitivity to cold. Food is the fuel that powers your mental and physical engine. Putting in the wrong fuel is like putting diesel in your petrol driven car.

The consequences of **smoking, and alcohol or drug abuse** are well publicised. As well as the physical harm to your body, they are strongly linked to depression, anxiety and mental deterioration. Not what you want for your psychological wellbeing.

Stress reduction has an important role. Life is full of stress: some stresses worse than others. Even pleasant events can be stressful. As well as improving our ability to confront and deal with stress, it is important to know how to recover and relax. It is essential to create some 'me' time to unwind, listen to some music, use relaxation techniques or engage in a relaxing activity.

Good sleep makes an important contribution to mental and physical health.

The amount of sleep we need naturally declines after the age of fifty. The average length of sleep each night may fall to six hours or fewer. However, people vary a lot in how much sleep they need. Number of hours is less important than the quality of sleep. This is improved through daytime

Mind how you go...

physical activity, avoiding hard to digest meals or stimulants (like coffee) late in the evening, having a regular 'winding down' routine before bedtime and avoiding 'napping' during the day. Hot 'bedtime' drinks may help but alcohol, although it may initially promote sleep, tends to create night time disturbance with increased bladder activity.

If you find it hard to sleep, it can be better to get up and engage in a relaxing activity rather than lie worrying.

Look after your mental health

Taking up **learning opportunities**, at any age, can enhance life and general health.

Research has found a clear connection between life long education and good cognitive (mental) functioning. That's partly because the brain needs exercise just like the body. Also people who pursue education are more likely to find ways of working around cognitive problems. Even engaging in mentally challenging activities like reading, doing crosswords or playing musical instruments can improve your cognitive functioning.

Mental stimulation, like physical exercise, can come from everyday activities. Participating in family and/or community activities is a major source of personal satisfaction.

Dealing with new situations and challenges, using and refreshing old knowledge and skills and engaging socially with others all keep the mind active. Being involved also plays an important role in improving self-esteem and giving meaning to life. This is true for people of all ages, but is especially important for older adults.

There are many ways to **get socially involved**, including providing family assistance (eg, DIY, baby sitting), participating in group activities, volunteering, and even taking another job. Social involvement also helps to fight depression, which is more common among those who withdraw from their friends, family, and community. Social isolation is a strong risk factor for health problems and early death. Good, close relationships promote wellbeing and a healthy sex life is good for you too.

Mind how you go...

For some people, **spirituality** is helpful in giving meaning and purpose to life. It can help make sense of who we are, of our past, present and future; whether this is within an organised religion, with a non-religious group, or as an individual. People of all ages have a spiritual dimension to their lives that can have a positive effect on mental health.

Beat the blues

Depression is one of the most common mental health issues experienced in retirement.

Of course it can happen to anyone. One in five people will experience significant periods of depression throughout their lives. Partly, this is because depression is a normal and natural response to certain kinds of life events such as physical illness, poor living conditions, bereavement, poverty and isolation.

Most depression is 'reactive'. It is triggered by circumstances and, very often, it will get better over time as circumstances change or as coping skills improve. Sometimes, however, people get stuck in depression and may need some extra help to deal with it.

Signs of depression can include:

- *a lasting feeling of being down or sad, more severe than normal sadness;*
- *losing your interest in life, not enjoying things in the way that you used to;*
- *wanting to avoid your usual social activities and avoid other people;*
- *finding even simple tasks a major effort and generally feeling tired and exhausted;*
- *losing your confidence and self-esteem; thinking that you are useless and people would be better off without you;*
- *not eating properly and losing or putting on weight;*
- *finding that your sleep is disturbed;*

Mind how you go...

- *finding it hard to concentrate, feeling restless and agitated and having memory problems;*
- *unexplained aches, pains or weakness;*
- *crying a lot;*
- *dwelling on things that have happened in the past and feeling guilty;*
- *feelings of hopelessness;*
- *self harming (for example, cutting yourself);*
- *thoughts of suicide.*

The earlier these signs are recognised, the easier treatment usually is. Unfortunately, as people get older, there is a tendency for these signs to be missed, misdiagnosed as physical health problems or dismissed as ‘part of ageing’.

There is nothing about ageing that makes depression inevitable. It can be recognised, prevented and treated.

There are some things you can do to help yourself.

Keep active. Yes, we’ve covered this already but depression can be the disease of doing nothing. You don’t feel like being active so you do less: the less you do, the more depressed you feel. A vicious circle! The less you do the more isolated you become in your low mood and the more negative your thoughts. You lose the opportunities for pleasure and happiness.

Talk to others. Often constructively sharing negative feelings (avoiding the temptation to simply dwell on them) can help to highlight ways forward and avoid the feeling that you are on your own. Other people may well have suffered similar depression.

Avoid the alcohol trap. Some people believe that ‘a wee drink’ helps them feel better. But alcohol is a depressant and overdoing it just makes the symptoms worse.

Challenge negative thoughts. Depression tends to make people concentrate only on the bad things in life. They forget the good times and the positive events. They forget the coping skills and abilities that have helped them in the past.

Mind how you go...

Negative thoughts often include:

Exaggeration	seeing things as much worse than they really are
Overgeneralisation	one bad event means everything is hopeless and helpless
Ignoring positives	failing to see or accept evidence of success or enjoyment
Personalising	everything is my fault because I'm useless and worthless
Eternalising	nothing will ever change for the better

***Depression tries to fool you into seeing only the worst.
Don't let it!***

Most depression gets better by itself. You can speed the process by following the tips above.

***Some depression can be more severe and enduring.
You may need psychological help or medication. If in doubt, see your doctor.***

Mind how you go...

Finally

This leaflet has addressed only a few of the common issues around retirement that may affect your psychological health and wellbeing.

Key messages have been:

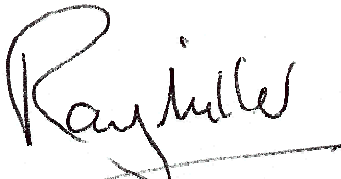
**Believe you have control
Don't be put off by myths about ageing
Look after your physical health
Look after your mental health
Beat the blues**

The information here is not comprehensive and you may wish to do your own research on some of these topics. Some starting points for resources are listed below.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Hopefully this leaflet has raised your awareness of how you can take control yourself in that process.

Retirement can be one of the happiest and most fulfilling periods of your life. A little understanding of some of the psychology may help you make the most of it.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ray Miller". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Ray Miller, BA, M Psychol, C Psychol, FBPsS

Email: RayMiller@RayMiller.net

Mind how you go...

Resources

Websites (surfing the web counts as brain exercise!)

www.actionforhappiness.org (National website for improving well-being)

www.happinesuk.com (Edinburgh based group promoting well-being)

www.dascot.org (Information about symptoms and treatment of depression)

www.edspace.org.uk (Provides useful information about resources in Edinburgh)

www.livinglifetothefull.com (Self help for depression and anxiety and related mental health issues)

http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/info/1454/mental_health (A very useful directory of national and local East Lothian services)

www.moodgym.anu.edu.au/ (Interactive self help site for cognitive behavioural therapy for depression)

www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/about/index.cfm (For free workbooks and resources for varied mental health issues)

http://www.mind.org.uk/help/people_groups_and_communities/older_people_and_mental_health (MIND guide to older people and mental health)

Organisations

CRUSE Bereavement Line – Helpline for bereaved people and those caring for bereaved people. Tel:08701 671677

West Lothian: Mood–Support and advice for people over sixty years old who have, or are at risk of, developing depression or mental health problems. Tel:01506 651067.

Midlothian: Early Intervention Crisis Response Service – Tel:0131 663 5533 [Mon–Fri 4pm–10pm; Sat&Sun 10am–4pm] (Community based support for people in Midlothian who are experiencing mental health difficulties, and their carers, when they are facing crisis.)

East Lothian: CHANGES Community Health Project – Promotes positive wellbeing, providing a resource base and information about support for people experiencing stress, depression, panic attacks, phobias and anxiety. Tel:0131 653 3977 or 3813. Web: www.changeschp.org.uk.

NHS 24: Tel: 08454 24 24 24, Textphone: 18001 08454 242424, Web: www.nhs24.com