How Psychology Can Facilitate Positive Ageing
Can we achieve this for everyone?

Mary A. Luszcz
Professor of Psychology and Gerontology
Director, Flinders Centre for Ageing Studies
Flinders University

Overview of Talk

- Introduction
- Psychology
- Conceptual Framework: Life-span Developmental Psychology (LSDP)
- Mechanisms for Enhancing Positive Ageing
- Along the way, Some Local Evidence - ALSA
- Conclusions & Recommendations: Can we achieve positive ageing for everyone?
Introduction

- Broad brush overview
- Role of our own perceptions, thoughts, attitudes in shaping ageing as a positive experience
- Ageing as a process, not a state, but state of mind is fundamental
  - implies that it is possible to intervene in it, i.e., our own ageing experience can be changed!
- Can we achieve positive ageing for everyone?
  - in principle, yes, but...

I don’t think I ever feel old…
I’ve been old for such a long time that it’s hard to know how to define that feeling.

Dame Roma Mitchell at 85 (1999)
Australian Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ALSA)

Multidisciplinary Scope: - bio-psycho-social

Sample:
- Population-based (Baseline = 2087; 565 couples)
- Heterogeneous:
  - Community dwelling & residential care
  - Households Stratified by Age & Gender:
    - 4 x 5-year cohorts from 70 & 1 x 85+

Duration: Baseline 1992 + 10 follow-ups: 11 Waves

Funding: NIA, NH&MC, ARC, Flinders University

Psychology

- Study of Human Behaviour
  - Individuals, Dyads, Groups, Systems
  - Cognition
  - Affect (Emotion)
  - Self (Personality)

- “Positive Psychology” (Seligman1988, via Maslow1954)
  - scientifically studying what has gone right, rather than wrong in both individuals and societies
  - nurturing strengths to improve normal life
  - life satisfaction, happiness, resilience
Propositions from Life Span Developmental Theory

Development entails:

- A dynamic between biology and culture
- Multidimensional and multidirectional
  - growth vs maintenance vs regulation of loss
- Allocation of resources to distinct functions
  - gain/loss dynamic, losses > gains with ageing
- Ontogenetic (autobiographical) and historical contextual is guiding paradigm

Facilitators of Positive Ageing from LS View

- Resources
  - Self,
  - Social,
  - Cognitive

- Dynamic: gains/losses
- Multi-dimensional - directional
Normative age-related changes in how we perceive our SELF

Depression
- 75% % Loss
- 10% % Gain
- 15% % Stable

Morale
- 70% % Loss
- 18% % Gain
- 12% % Stable

Self-Esteem
- 78% % Loss
- 11% % Gain
- 11% % Stable

Control
- 76% % Loss
- 14% % Gain
- 10% % Stable


Current Cognition (MMSE)
- 78% % Loss
- 11% % Gain
- 13% % Stable

Speed
- 78% % Loss
- 11% % Gain
- 9% % Stable

Naming
- 86% % Loss
- 2% % Gain
- 12% % Stable

Memory: Symbol
- 86% % Loss
- 8% % Gain
- 6% % Stable

Memory: Picture
- 73% % Loss
- 19% % Gain
- 8% % Stable
MECHANISMS FOR ENHANCING POSITIVE AGEING

In no particular order

Self Resources

- recent elaboration of notion of reserves or buffers or moderators of various outcomes
- In realm of psychological well-being self-esteem & perceived control
- Contribute to
  - Personal growth or modification of self-image
  - Maintenance of capacities for resilience
  - Regulation of loss or coping
  - Overall positive affect
More Evidence from ALSA about Benefits of Control

Linked to

- adapting well to driving cessation,
  - Often accompanied by depressive symptoms,
  - impact of these is less if sense of perceived control is maintained
- having larger social networks, especially with friends
- contributes to sense of integrity or wholeness, experiencing few regrets
Control the darker ages

Self-Concept & Self-Compassion

- The organized, coherent, integrated pattern of self-perceptions, includes self-esteem

- Self-compassion: compassion turned inward
  - Self-kindness - treat self with care, not criticism
  - Common humanity - recognising loss as shared aspect of human experience, not isolating
  - Mindfulness - paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally
Possible Selves (Markus)

- Created by projecting yourself into the future
- thinking about hopes and fears
  - what you would like to become?
  - What you are afraid of becoming?
- ALSA $\rightarrow$ generativity
  - caring for others
    - nurturing, mentoring, guiding
  - leaving a lasting legacy

Possible Selves as part of LS Context

- Continuity with earlier self
- Aspirations or present self
- Goals for future self
- Openness to experience
Links Between Well-being and Perceptions of Self & Falls

- “Have you had any falls in the past year - including those falls that did not result in injury as well as those that did?”
  - Net of age, gender, education, health, smoking, alcohol use, psychotropic medication
- Worse Morale, Depression and Sense of Control each independently predicted incidence of falls, both between participants, and over time within participants

Cognitive Resources also Link to Positive Ageing

Marked cognitive decline over first two years predicts higher rate of mortality in subsequent 7 years
Use it or Lose it?

- Predicts that engagement in intellectual physical, and/or social activities offers protective benefits for cognitive decline
- By ‘exercising’ our mind, we forestall, slow down or prevent erosion of cognitive skills
- Contentious but compelling
  - Evidence is mixed and inconclusive
  - Mostly correlational or cross-sectional
  - Mechanisms unclear

Interpersonal and Social Resources

- Social Membership

- Social Networks
  - Family
  - friends
  - Confidants
  - Total

- Being Married
Social Membership (Clubs, Church, Groups)


Social Networks

*Flinders University*

+ lower tertile  + middle tertile  + upper tertile
Conclusion

- *Can we achieve positive ageing for everyone?*
  - Knowledge of sense of self, especially perceived control is powerful
  - Self-compassion offers a way to deal with/accept losses
  - Remaining cognitively and social engaged also promotes ageing well

- Much of how positive we experience ageing to be depends on psychological resources and our context

**Ageing Positively -**

*No one way to do it!*
Thanks - FCAS Staff/Students

- Carla Raphael - Research Assistant
- Penny Edwards - Program Manager
- Lesley Sommers - Research/Admin Assistant
- Chris Materne - PhD Student (RA/Tutor)
- Kathryn Browne-Yung - Data Manager (PhD Student)
- Dr Ruth Walker - ARC Post-doctoral Fellow
- Linda Isherwood - PhD Student (NILS/FCAS)
- Mydair Hunter - RA (Hons Student)

Prof Kaarin Anstey, Flinders Adjunct Director, Ageing Research Unit, ANU

http://flinders.edu.au/sabs/fcas/