

The Impact of Widowhood on the Mental Health of the Elderly and Countermeasures

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Abstract

With the acceleration of the process of social aging in China, ensuring the mental health of the elderly to promote the realization of active aging has become a hot issue of public concern. Based on this situation, many studies have selected the elderly as a group to conduct a series of related studies, and some studies have studied specific older persons, such as widowed seniors. Widowhood, as one of the major negative life events in the course of life, is bound to bring a lot of mental health problems to the elderly, widowhood means that the elderly have lost important social support, the elderly will always be immersed in grief. The negative impact of widowhood on older people has been confirmed by some studies. This paper will summarize the impact of widowhood on the elderly, sort out the factors affecting the mental health of widowed elderly people, and try to provide advice to protect the mental health of widowed elderly people.

Keywords

Widowhood; The elderly; Mental health.

1. Introduction

According to the data of the seventh national census, the total number of elderly people aged 60 and above in mainland China in 2020 is 264 million, accounting for 18.7% of the total population. It has been 20 years since China began to enter an aging society in 2000, and the proportion of the elderly population has increased by 8.4 percentage points, and the growth rate has increased by 5.4 percentage points in the 10 years from the sixth national census in 2010 to the seventh national census in 2020, compared with the previous 10 years, the growth rate of the next 10 years has accelerated significantly [1]. This means that we will soon have to deal with a more rapid period of population ageing. According to the results of the sixth national census, there were 47.4792 million widowed elderly people in 2010, accounting for 26.89% of the total population of the elderly [2], and the forecast results show that the total number of widowed elderly people in China will continue to grow rapidly from 2010 to 2050, reaching 118.4 million by 2050, which is 2.5 times that of 2010 [3]. This will undoubtedly increase the burden of care for families and increase the pressure on the supply of basic public services. Duval's family life cycle theory argues that older people are in the eighth phase of the family life cycle and are most likely to face life events such as declining economic conditions, the death of spouses and friends, and health problems. Widowhood has the greatest negative impact on the elderly. British psychologist Paulby pointed out that losing a spouse is also equivalent to losing the object of attachment, equivalent to stripping the safe base from the body, and may even destroy our entire world. Spouses are not only the spiritual support of the elderly, but also play a role in mutual care in life. Whether the elderly can bear the pain of widowhood will not only affect their own mental health level, but also the resulting problems will increase the pressure of support for adult children and bring difficulties to social public services. Clarify what kind of impact widowhood will have on the psychology of the elderly, so that the improvement of the

mental health level of widowed elderly people is targeted, and provides a reference for relevant social security institutions.

2. Effects of Widowhood on the Mental Health of the Elderly

2.1. The Impact of Widowhood on Loneliness in the Elderly

Loneliness is the most direct psychological feeling experienced by the elderly after losing their spouse. Attachment theory states that after losing the primary attachment, a series of negative feelings arise, and loneliness is one of them[4]. Zhao Xiaohang and others have found that widowhood raises loneliness in both elderly men and elderly women. Over time, the effect of widowhood on loneliness in the elderly will diminish, and the level of loneliness in recently widowed elderly women is significantly higher than that of long-term widowed elderly women[5]. Surveys by Qiu Dan et al. showed that the UCLA Loneliness Scale scores of the elderly with different marital status differed significantly, with the elderly with spouses living a fuller life, while the loneliness of the elderly who had lost their spouses was relatively obvious[6]. This may be due to the loss of a spouse, the elderly lose the main object of communication, but also lose the person who cares most about him, and even some elderly people will change their lifestyles, resulting in a sense of gap and loneliness in the elderly.

2.2. The Effect of Widowhood on Depression in the Elderly

Entering the stage of old age, it is inevitable to face the loss of appearance, health, ability, memory, status and other aspects, in this process, the elderly will inevitably produce depression. The study of Li Ling et al. also confirmed that a high number of negative life events, a high overall score of negative events, and a high score of family-related problems all increase the risk of depression in old age [7]. Widowhood, as an inevitable major negative event for the vast majority of the elderly, deepens the depression of the elderly, and excessive depression will endanger the physical health of the elderly, and even cause suicide in the elderly and increase the pressure of family care. A study by Jing Lushi et al. on the depression of widowed elderly people in rural areas found that 21 people (38.9%) had no depressive symptoms, 26 people with mild depressive symptoms (48.1%), and 7 people with moderate and major depressive symptoms (13.0%)[8]. Wu Xiaolian et al. also found that the detection rate of depressive symptoms in widowed elderly people from rural areas was higher than that of widowed elderly people in urban areas and higher than that of ordinary elderly people[9]. The reason for this phenomenon may be that the economic base in rural areas is weak, and the children of the vast majority of the elderly work outside the home for a long time, lack of communication and care; Recreational activities in rural areas are relatively simple, and there is a lack of supportive public welfare construction. Its study also found that widowed elderly people living alone had higher levels of depression than non-solitary widowed elderly people, and poor self-care ability is also the cause of depressed mood in widowed elderly people. This may be because the elderly with poor self-care ability are more likely to have psychological burdens, thinking that they are useless, adding trouble to their children and society.

2.3. The Effect of Widowhood on The Subjective Well-being of the Elderly

Subjective well-being is the subjective perception of life and the personal evaluation of the state of life in the elderly[10]. Subjective well-being can not only be used as a criterion for judging the mental health of the elderly, but also as a necessary condition for physical and mental health. Resource conservation theory holds that a change in marital status is one of the most significant changes in the course of an individual's life, and widowhood is one of the most difficult and painful events, and that older people need more time and energy to adjust and adapt to this change than divorce [11]. Studies by Cheng Xinfeng, Jiang Quanbao and others found that widowhood is an important reason for the subjective well-being of the elderly. Compared with

the elderly with a spouse, the widowed elderly have a lower subjective sense of well-being[12]. On the one hand, because widowhood can lead to negative emotions such as depression and loneliness in the elderly, it will inevitably affect the reduction of subjective well-being. On the other hand, due to changes in marital status, the lifestyle of the elderly may change, the degree of participation in social activities may be reduced, the lack of spousal care may be greatly worse than before, resulting in a decline in subjective well-being. Their study also found that widowhood reduced the subjective well-being of older women, but the effect of widowhood on the subjective well-being of older men was not statistically significant[12]. This may be due to the fact that women are in the role of caregivers in the family and have adapted to caring for others and tend to feel happy from it. After widowhood, women have difficulty adapting, thereby reducing subjective well-being, most families in which men are dominant and may have more social relationships, and after widowhood, they are more likely to find other social support forces to balance the reduced happiness brought about by some widowhood.

2.4. The Effects of Widowhood on Anxiety in the Elderly

The death of a spouse increases anxiety in the elderly, manifested in the fact that the elderly feel that they will also face death when death occurs in the person closest to them, resulting in increased anxiety. The elderly are prone to health problems physically, and after widowhood, a little illness will also make them overly anxious, either going to the hospital with a big emotion, or showing an indifferent and ignoring attitude towards the disease [13]. At present, there is little attention to the anxiety of widowed elderly people in China, and there is a lack of research. But some studies from abroad can see that widowhood increases anxiety in the elderly. Through systematic reviews, Onrus et al. found that the probability of anxiety in the elderly within one year of widowhood is greatly increased, and the risk of developing generalized anxiety disorder is also higher, and about 31% of older adults can meet the diagnostic criteria for generalized anxiety disorder[14]. The elderly are constantly in a state of anxiety and are prone to oversensitivity to changes in physical condition, which triggers other negative emotions such as irritability, which is not conducive to their physical and mental harmony.

3. Factors Affecting the Mental Health of Widowed Elderly People

3.1. The Social Support

The social convoy model believes that individuals need different companionship and protection at different ages, that is, different social support [15]. Spouses, as one of the main social supporters of the elderly, provide them with love, care, and spiritual support. When a spouse is lost, the sources of social support for the elderly can be divided into neighbors, children, friends, society, etc. Elderly people with more social support have better adaptability, are healthier physically and mentally, and are more positive about life after widowhood. Research by Sun Xiaodong and others found that an increase in the number of daughters rather than sons can significantly improve the mental health of widowed elderly people in urban and rural areas [16]. It may be that the daily care of the elderly is more in the daughter's work, and the daughter is more likely to express her feelings to her parents, so it can provide more emotional support for the elderly parents. Their study also found that the increase in the frequency of interaction with relatives and neighbors can significantly improve the mental health of rural widowed elderly people, and the increase in the frequency of interaction with friends can significantly improve the mental health of urban widowed elderly people[16]. This may be due to the fact that rural older people live less mobile and have better relationships with relatives and neighbors, so the support of relatives and friends is important to them, while urban older people may pay more attention to being with friends with the same interests and hobbies, so support from friends can significantly improve their mental health. The research of Gu Mengmeng et al. shows that social support has a direct effect on mental health, and social

support has great significance for improving the mental health of the elderly, especially in terms of emotional experience, self-awareness, and interpersonal communication[17].

3.2. Mode of Residence

The results of previous studies have shown that different ways of living have a significant impact on the quality of life of the elderly. Wang Wulin and others have found that there are differences in the quality of life of rural elderly people under different living styles, and the quality of life of rural elderly people living with three generations or more is the best, followed by the elderly in the second generation of households, and the elderly who live together in the second generation, and the elderly who live together in the next generation and live alone have the worst quality of life[18]. It may be due to the larger the population in the family, the more elderly people receive more care, and the elderly feel more cared for, so that they feel a high quality of life. Li Mingfeng carefully studied the impact of living style on the loneliness, subjective happiness, economic status, and self-assessment of health of widowed elderly people. In terms of loneliness, the proportion of widowed elderly people living alone and living with grandchildren often feels lonely is relatively higher, while the proportion of widowed elderly people living with married daughters and married sons is relatively lower. In urban and rural areas, the proportion of widowed elderly people who often feel lonely shows the characteristics of rural areas higher than urban and urban areas in various types[19]. The reason for the first point is that living with grandchildren requires the elderly to spend more time to take care of them, and the elderly who raise grandchildren are more likely to develop internal pressure and therefore show a sense of loneliness comparable to that of the elderly living alone, while living with married children is more likely to be cared for and financially and spiritually supported. Most of the adult children in rural areas go out to work, most of the parents are given economic support, less attention is paid to companionship, rural entertainment facilities for the elderly, pension services, etc. are not as many as in cities and towns, so there is a difference in the loneliness of widowed elderly people in cities and rural areas. Widowed elderly people living with married daughters have the best coefficients in terms of daily life care, loneliness, self-assessment health and happiness, and have the highest quality of life, followed by living with married sons. Widowed elderly people living alone are more likely to live with unmarried children and grandchildren in terms of self-assessment of health, financial status and happiness[19]. It can be seen that parent-child cohabitation increases the mental health of widowed elderly people to some extent.

3.3. Rebuilding A Marriage

Based on the above discussion, we learn that the elderly are prone to loneliness and depression after widowhood. and other negative emotions, and remarriage provides an opportunity to get a spouse again. By reconstructing marriage, widows and elderly people can take care of each other and care for each other, so that the elderly can reduce loneliness, promote their mental health, and reduce the psychological pressure of adult children to take care of the elderly. Wang Baicheng also believes that remarriage is conducive to improving the physical health and mental health of widowed elderly people[20]. Having a spouse allows widowed elderly people to receive good physical care and spiritual care, reducing loneliness and depression. However, as Liu Xiaoran's research shows, the obstacle to remarriage of widowed elderly people has always existed, one is the limitation of traditional concepts, and the children of widowed elderly people are not aware of the emotional needs of their elderly parents, believing that remarriage is unfaithful to their deceased parents; Second, there is a lack of social support, and there are still fewer institutions and departments in our country that help widowed elderly people to remarry[21]. Third, economic and property disputes, the children's inheritance rights to property after remarriage are prone to disputes[22]. As a result of these problems, the

psychological burden of remarriage in widowed elderly people is increased, and the chances of regaining happiness are reduced.

3.4. Other Factors

Coping methods can be understood as strategies used by people to influence internal and external environmental stimuli on the basis of cognitive evaluation. People who adopt positive coping methods will objectively look at themselves and the environment, and give full play to their own advantages to face difficulties, while people who adopt negative coping methods are often passive in the face of reality and cannot find effective solutions. Huang Yongqing et al. found that coping style is one of the factors affecting the overall mental health status of middle-aged and elderly people, and the higher the score of negative factors in coping style, the worse their mental health status[23]. The study of Jing Lushi et al. also shows that the probability of negative response in rural widowed elderly people is greater, so the negative response has a significant impact on the depression of rural widowed elderly people, and has become a factor that can predict depression in rural widowed elderly[8]. The frequency with which widowed older adults participate in social activities can also affect their mental health. Studies by People of Wei Xiuping have shown that a higher level of social participation can significantly reduce the risk of death in older adults[24]. Social engagement helps widowed older adults to seek their own worth and to feel connected to others in their interactions.

4. Summary and Suggestion

In summary, we learned that widowhood has a negative impact on the mental health of the elderly that cannot be ignored, increasing the negative emotions such as loneliness, depression and anxiety in the elderly, and reducing the happiness of the elderly. With the acceleration of China's aging process, widowed elderly will continue to increase, how to protect the mental health of widowed elderly, promote the realization of active aging should become the focus of attention of society, government, family, community and other organizations. Through the sorting out of some influencing factors, this paper proposes the following solutions:

4.1. Build A Comprehensive Social Support System.

The community or social service agency where the elderly live should create an atmosphere of caring for the mental health of the elderly and make the elderly aware of the importance of mental health. On this basis, psychological services such as psychological counseling and counseling are provided for widowed elderly people. Set up special psychological service workstations in the community to often care for widowed elderly people, help them channel their emotions, and in the case of serious widowed elderly people, they can carry out case-by-case intervention. The community where the elderly live should organize more themed activities such as literary and artistic performances for the elderly, enrich the spiritual life of the elderly, mobilize the elderly to form a group for the elderly, so that the widowed elderly can increase their contact with others and reduce the sense of loneliness and depression. Whether in cities or rural areas, a considerable number of activity facilities for the elderly should be built so that the elderly's body can be exercised and bad emotions can be vented. The government, social organizations and the masses should unite to create a sound social support system. The government should increase funds to invest in the welfare of the elderly in the community, and absorb professionals or social workers in mental health services to participate in social work; Social organizations should encourage widowed elderly people to form mutual aid groups so that widows and elderly people can gain a sense of belonging. The masses should open their minds, truly realize that widows and elderly people have special needs, and provide them with more help. Children should express more emotional support for widowed parents, rather than simply financial support.

4.2. Respect the Willingness of Widowed Elderly People to Live

Different ways of living have a great impact on the quality of life of widowed elderly people, which directly affects whether widowed elderly people can receive physical care and whether their needs can be met in a timely manner. Therefore, some scholars have suggested that children go home to take care of their parents or solve problems by living with them. However, studies have shown that whether the willingness of widowed elderly people to live is satisfied is also a factor affecting life satisfaction. Older people whose lifestyle aspirations are satisfied are higher[25]. The single promotion of parent-child cohabitation may also increase the pressure on children. Therefore, the willingness of widowed elderly people to live should be fully respected, and the policy of daily attention and frequent visits should be adopted for widowed elderly people who are willing to live alone to reduce their risk of living alone. Elderly persons living with their children shall be compensated for the welfare of their family members. Family members who spend most of their time and energy caring for widows and elderly people may have fewer working hours and lower wages, but they will reduce the pressure on the relevant institutions of society. Providing social benefits to family members can alleviate the real pressures on family members and enable widowed older persons to receive quality care.

4.3. Remove Barriers to Remarriage Among Widowed Elderly People

Remarriage facilitates widowed older people to re-establish intimate relationships and access important social support resources. According to a survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 80% of widowed elderly people want to remarry, but few actually register their marriages [22]. This shows that there are some difficulties in remarrying widowed elderly people that need to be solved. Governments should call on social workers to go deep into communities to understand the reasons for the difficulty of remarriage among widowed elderly people. For the elderly who are bound by traditional concepts, professional models such as cognitive behavioral therapy are used to guide them, so that they can recognize their cognitive biases, so as to cross psychological barriers and pursue happiness. For the elderly who lack the support of adult children, social workers should strengthen the communication between widowed elderly people and their children, so that their children realize that widowed parents have spiritual needs, and the support of children is the greatest filial piety for widowed elderly people. It can also enable the elderly who have successfully remarried to share their experiences with the elderly who have needs but concerns, so that the widowed elderly can achieve the effect of mutual assistance.

4.4. Changing the Negative Coping Style of Widowed Older Adults

Widowed elderly people are prone to adopt negative coping methods in the face of practical difficulties, such as being easily discouraged and stubborn. Therefore, the community where the widowed elderly live should adopt more observational methods and case studies to counsel widowed elderly people who adopt negative coping methods. Make them change their concepts, actively seek social resources to solve problems, and adopt more positive coping methods, so as to reduce the generation of bad emotions.

5. Deficiencies and Prospects

Although widowed elderly people have received some academic attention as a special group, their research still has the following shortcomings. Most of the first domestic studies on the mental health of widowed elderly people were cross-cutting studies, which explored the correlation between variables, but could not explain the causal relationship between variables. In addition to widowhood, there are other factors, such as cultural attainment, gender, social support, etc., and it is difficult to exclude the influence of these variables in the study of widowhood on the mental health of the elderly. Third, although some scholars have discussed

the positive effects of remarriage on widowed elderly people from the theoretical level, empirical research is quite lacking. The quality of marriage between spouses could be used as a new variable in future studies to consider the different effects of widowhood on older persons. From the empirical level, we can examine which programs have a positive effect on the mental health of widowed elderly people, and explore whether case studies, group counseling and other forms are helpful for the mental health of widowed elderly people.

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