

Behavioural Pathways to Resilience and Psychological Adaptation in Older Adults: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

Ageing has traditionally been examined through deficit-focused perspectives that emphasise decline, dependency, and increased vulnerability. Although such views are important for understanding clinical risks, they do not fully capture the adaptive psychological processes that enable many older adults to maintain emotional stability and meaning in the face of adversity. Contemporary psychological research increasingly conceptualises resilience in later life as a dynamic behavioural and cognitive process shaped by coping patterns, emotional regulation, social relationships, and interpretive meaning-making. These adaptive processes allow individuals to reorganise psychological resources and maintain wellbeing despite illness, loss, and changing life roles. The present conceptual review integrates theoretical and empirical literature to examine behavioural mechanisms that support resilience and psychological adaptation in older adulthood. Drawing from lifespan developmental theory, behavioural health frameworks, and culturally grounded perspectives, the review explores how coping strategies, cognitive appraisal, emotional flexibility, and interpersonal support contribute to adaptive functioning. Particular emphasis is placed on the Indian socio-cultural environment, where family interconnectedness, collective identity, and spiritual belief systems influence how adversity is understood and managed. The review highlights the need to shift ageing research beyond pathology-oriented models toward strength-based perspectives that recognise the potential for continued psychological development. By synthesising behavioural, emotional, and cultural dimensions of adaptation, this paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework for understanding resilience in older adults. The findings have implications for psychological practice, community mental health interventions, and ageing-related policy initiatives. Recognising resilience as an adaptive behavioural process offers a more balanced understanding of ageing and supports the development of culturally responsive approaches to promote wellbeing in later life.

Keywords: *Resilience, psychological adaptation, ageing, older adults, coping, positive ageing*

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Population ageing in India represents a complex intersection of demographic expansion, social transformation, and evolving psychological realities. Increased life expectancy, improvements in medical infrastructure, and enhanced public health measures have contributed to a substantial rise in the proportion of older adults within the population (United Nations, 2020). Simultaneously, declining fertility rates and accelerated urbanisation have reshaped traditional family arrangements, altering patterns of intergenerational support and daily interaction (Chatterji et al., 2015). Migration of younger family members for employment and education has further redefined familial roles, leaving many older adults to navigate later life within changing relational and social environments (Bloom et al., 2015). These developments underscore the importance of understanding ageing not solely as a biological progression but as a multidimensional psychological and behavioural process shaped by cultural, social, and environmental influences.

Historically, research in gerontology and health psychology has emphasised vulnerability, focusing on cognitive decline, functional impairment, and increased dependence in later life (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Harmell et al., 2014). While such perspectives remain important for clinical assessment and intervention, they present only a partial view of the ageing experience. Contemporary lifespan developmental theories propose that psychological development continues throughout adulthood, allowing for adaptive reorganisation, emotional maturity, and meaning-oriented reflection (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Carstensen et al., 2011). This shift in perspective has encouraged scholars to examine ageing through a strengths-based lens, recognising the potential for resilience, adaptation, and continued psychological growth.

Positive ageing frameworks emphasise capacities that often consolidate with age, including emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and selective investment in meaningful relationships (Carstensen, 1999). Empirical evidence suggests that older adults frequently report stable or improved emotional wellbeing despite increased exposure to health-related challenges, a phenomenon sometimes described as the emotional paradox of ageing (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). These findings suggest that ageing does not inevitably result in psychological decline but may involve adaptive processes that support emotional stability. In the Indian context, cultural values emphasising interdependence, family continuity, and spiritual meaning provide additional psychological resources that influence how adversity is interpreted and managed (Lamb, 2014; Pandya, 2018).

Despite these adaptive capacities, later life is also associated with significant psychosocial stressors. Chronic health conditions, multimorbidity, reduced mobility, and financial insecurity can restrict independence and social participation (Patel & Chauhan, 2020). Widowhood and social isolation, particularly among older women, may contribute to emotional distress and reduced perceived social value (Arokiasamy et al., 2012). Epidemiological research indicates that a substantial proportion of older adults experience symptoms of depression and loneliness, reflecting the psychological burden associated with ageing-related transitions (Tiwari et al., 2021). However, exposure to adversity does not uniformly result in diminished wellbeing. Many older individuals demonstrate the capacity to maintain psychological balance or even experience personal growth, highlighting the importance of examining mechanisms that support adaptation.

Resilience has emerged as a key construct for understanding adaptive functioning in later life. Rather than representing a fixed personality characteristic, resilience is increasingly

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conceptualised as a dynamic process involving behavioural adjustment, emotional regulation, and cognitive reinterpretation of stressful experiences (Windle, 2011). Lifespan theories suggest that older adults draw upon accumulated experience, refined coping skills, and shifting priorities to maintain emotional equilibrium (Freund & Baltes, 2002). Resilience may manifest through acceptance of limitations, recalibration of personal goals, and engagement in emotionally meaningful relationships, enabling individuals to sustain psychological stability despite ongoing change.

Closely related to resilience is the concept of post-traumatic growth, which refers to positive psychological transformation arising from engagement with adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Growth in this context does not imply absence of distress but reflects constructive adaptation through meaning-making and reinterpretation of life events. In later life, experiences such as bereavement, illness, caregiving, and social transitions may prompt reflection and realignment of personal values (Helgeson et al., 2006). Such processes can contribute to enhanced appreciation of life, strengthened relationships, and increased psychological depth.

Behavioural health perspectives provide an integrative framework for understanding how resilience and adaptation are facilitated. Coping strategies, emotional regulation patterns, and cognitive appraisal processes interact to influence psychological outcomes (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Adaptive coping approaches, including acceptance, problem-focused engagement, and positive reframing, are associated with better emotional adjustment, whereas avoidant coping and persistent rumination may increase vulnerability to distress (Aldwin et al., 2014). Social support further plays a protective role by reinforcing emotional security and promoting adaptive behavioural responses (Antonucci et al., 2010).

Within the Indian cultural context, spiritual beliefs and relational interdependence contribute significantly to psychological adaptation. Religious practices and philosophical traditions often provide interpretive frameworks that situate adversity within broader existential meaning systems (Pandya, 2018). Family relationships continue to influence identity and perceived self-worth, even as family structures evolve in response to social change (Lamb, 2014). These culturally embedded influences suggest that behavioural pathways to resilience may reflect culturally specific patterns of adaptation.

Despite growing international attention to resilience and adaptive ageing, research focusing on Indian older adults remains relatively limited. Much of the existing literature has emphasised disease burden and psychological distress rather than examining behavioural mechanisms that support adaptation and wellbeing (Chatterji et al., 2015). Furthermore, resilience is often studied in isolation, without integrating behavioural, emotional, and socio-cultural determinants into a comprehensive conceptual framework. This fragmentation restricts the development of interventions aimed at promoting psychological wellbeing in ageing populations.

The present conceptual review addresses this gap by examining behavioural pathways that support resilience and psychological adaptation in older adults. By synthesising theoretical models and culturally relevant perspectives, this review seeks to advance understanding of how older individuals respond to adversity, construct meaning, and maintain emotional stability. In doing so, it contributes to reframing ageing as a period of continued psychological significance and highlights implications for mental health practice,

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community-based interventions, and policy initiatives aimed at promoting wellbeing in later life.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A comprehensive understanding of resilience and psychological adaptation in later adulthood requires integration of theoretical perspectives and empirical findings across gerontology, behavioural health, and lifespan psychology. Over the past several decades, ageing research has evolved from deficit-oriented interpretations toward more balanced models that recognise adaptive capacity and continued psychological development. The following review synthesises global and Indian scholarship to trace conceptual transitions, examine behavioural and cultural influences, and identify gaps relevant to resilience and psychological growth in older populations.

Conceptual Evolution in Ageing Research

Early gerontological theories largely reflected biomedical and decline-focused assumptions, portraying ageing as a period characterised by physical deterioration, reduced social participation, and psychological disengagement. Disengagement theory, one of the earliest formal models, proposed that gradual withdrawal from social roles was a natural and adaptive response to ageing (Cumming & Henry, 1961). Although widely influential, this perspective was criticised for its deterministic assumptions and for overlooking variability in individual experiences and sociocultural influences. Subsequent empirical studies demonstrated that many older adults remain socially active, emotionally stable, and psychologically engaged, challenging the universality of disengagement.

In response, activity theory proposed that sustained engagement in meaningful roles contributes positively to wellbeing in later life (Havighurst, 1963). This framework shifted attention toward behavioural participation and psychological involvement as protective factors. However, critics noted that activity theory sometimes overlooked structural barriers such as illness, disability, and socioeconomic inequality, which may limit opportunities for continued engagement (Achenbaum & Bengtson, 1994). Despite these limitations, early theoretical debates helped establish the foundation for contemporary models that conceptualise ageing as a dynamic and adaptive process.

With the emergence of lifespan developmental psychology, ageing began to be understood within a broader developmental continuum. Lifespan theories emphasise that psychological growth, emotional regulation, and identity adaptation continue throughout adulthood (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Rather than representing a uniform trajectory of decline, ageing reflects diverse developmental pathways influenced by personal, social, and cultural factors. This shift in theoretical orientation contributed to the emergence of strength-based constructs such as resilience, successful ageing, and post-adversity growth (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

Theoretical Frameworks Explaining Adaptive Ageing

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) provides a widely accepted explanation for motivational and emotional changes across adulthood. According to SST, individuals who perceive their remaining time as limited prioritise emotionally meaningful relationships and experiences (Carstensen, 1999). This selective engagement enhances emotional regulation and contributes to increased psychological stability. Empirical research supports this theory, demonstrating that older adults often report fewer negative emotional experiences and

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greater emotional balance compared to younger individuals (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Reed & Carstensen, 2012).

Complementing this perspective, the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model describes how individuals adapt to age-related changes by selecting attainable goals, optimising available resources, and compensating for functional limitations (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Engagement in SOC processes has been associated with greater autonomy, improved coping capacity, and higher subjective wellbeing (Freund & Baltes, 2002). These theoretical frameworks collectively suggest that adaptive behavioural regulation plays a central role in maintaining psychological functioning in later life.

Contemporary conceptualisations further emphasise that resilience reflects an ongoing adaptive process shaped by behavioural, cognitive, and environmental factors rather than a fixed personality trait (Windle, 2011). This perspective aligns with broader developmental models that recognise psychological adaptation as a dynamic interaction between internal capacities and external contexts.

Resilience as a Developmental and Behavioural Process

Resilience has become a focal construct in ageing research, reflecting growing interest in understanding how individuals maintain psychological wellbeing despite adversity. Defined as the ability to adapt effectively in response to stressors, resilience involves behavioural flexibility, emotional regulation, and cognitive reinterpretation (Windle, 2011). Contrary to assumptions that adaptive capacity diminishes with age, research indicates that older adults often demonstrate resilience comparable to or greater than younger populations (Gooding et al., 2012; Nygren et al., 2005).

Longitudinal studies have shown that many older individuals maintain stable levels of wellbeing despite exposure to significant life transitions such as retirement, health decline, or bereavement (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Emotional maturity, experiential learning, and acceptance of life circumstances are frequently identified as mechanisms supporting resilience (Bonanno et al., 2012). These findings suggest that later life may involve psychological consolidation rather than inevitable decline.

Cultural Influences on Resilience: Indian Perspectives

Resilience in later life is influenced not only by individual psychological processes but also by cultural and social environments. In India, collectivist traditions emphasising family interconnectedness, respect for elders, and shared responsibility shape ageing experiences (Lamb, 2014). Older adults embedded in supportive family networks often report greater emotional security and reduced psychological distress (Gupta & Pillai, 2021).

Spiritual beliefs represent another important dimension of psychological adaptation. Religious practices, meditation, and philosophical traditions provide interpretive frameworks that help individuals find meaning in adversity (Pandya, 2018). Such culturally embedded coping mechanisms contribute to emotional stability and acceptance. Studies comparing living arrangements have found that older adults residing in joint family systems report lower loneliness and greater resilience compared to those living alone (Srivastava et al., 2020).

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Despite these protective factors, Indian ageing research has frequently focused on illness burden and caregiving stress, with limited emphasis on adaptive psychological processes. This imbalance highlights the need for integrative frameworks that incorporate behavioural, emotional, and cultural dimensions of resilience.

Post-Traumatic Growth in Later Adulthood

Post-traumatic growth refers to positive psychological change arising from engagement with challenging life events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Growth may manifest as enhanced personal strength, deeper relationships, increased appreciation of life, and spiritual development. Although initially studied in younger populations, subsequent research has demonstrated that post-traumatic growth occurs across the lifespan (Helgeson et al., 2006).

Older adulthood often involves cumulative exposure to adversity, including illness, caregiving, and social transitions. These experiences can stimulate reflection and meaning reconstruction, facilitating psychological adaptation (Manning et al., 2019). Growth does not eliminate distress but reflects constructive integration of life experiences.

Indian research emphasises the role of spirituality and relational meaning in facilitating growth. Cultural narratives and religious beliefs provide frameworks for interpreting adversity as meaningful rather than purely disruptive (Pandya, 2018). Caregivers of individuals with dementia, for example, have reported increased emotional maturity and strengthened sense of purpose despite caregiving burden (Chaudhary & Mishra, 2020).

Role of Social Support and Behavioural Coping

Social support remains one of the most consistent predictors of psychological resilience. Emotional and instrumental support contribute to reduced depression and improved life satisfaction (Antonucci et al., 2010). Strong social networks facilitate adaptive coping and reinforce emotional stability.

Coping strategies play a central role in mediating responses to adversity. Adaptive coping approaches, including acceptance, problem-focused coping, and cognitive reframing, are associated with improved adjustment (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In contrast, avoidance-based coping strategies increase vulnerability to distress (Aldwin et al., 2014).

Behavioural interventions such as mindfulness, social engagement, and physical activity have demonstrated effectiveness in enhancing resilience and wellbeing (Windle et al., 2020). In India, culturally rooted practices such as yoga and meditation provide accessible pathways for emotional regulation and psychological adaptation (Sharma & Singh, 2022).

Psychological Vulnerability and Constraints on Adaptation

Despite adaptive capacities, ageing is associated with increased vulnerability to mental health challenges. Depression and loneliness affect a significant proportion of older adults, particularly those experiencing social isolation or chronic illness (Tiwari et al., 2021). Urbanisation and migration have contributed to changes in family structures, increasing the risk of emotional isolation (Patel & Chauhan, 2020).

Multimorbidity, caregiving stress, and reduced social engagement may limit adaptive capacity. These factors highlight the importance of developing interventions that strengthen behavioural coping and psychological resilience.

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Research Gap and Conceptual Need

Although international research has advanced understanding of resilience and adaptive ageing, Indian scholarship remains fragmented. Many studies emphasise pathology rather than adaptive psychological processes. Furthermore, behavioural, cognitive, and cultural influences are often examined independently rather than within integrated frameworks.

Addressing this gap requires conceptual synthesis that situates resilience within broader behavioural and cultural contexts. Such integration can inform interventions aimed at promoting psychological wellbeing and positive ageing.

Research Gap and Rationale

Although global geriatric psychology literature has increasingly recognised resilience and post-traumatic growth as important determinants of psychological wellbeing in later life, evidence emerging from the Indian context remains comparatively limited and conceptually fragmented. Much of the existing Indian research has concentrated on clinical indicators such as multimorbidity, depression prevalence, caregiver burden, and functional impairment (Patel & Chauhan, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2021). While such investigations provide essential insight into vulnerability and service needs, they offer relatively limited understanding of the adaptive behavioural and psychological mechanisms through which older adults maintain emotional stability and adjust to adversity. As a result, strength-oriented constructs such as resilience, adaptive coping, and psychological growth remain insufficiently integrated into Indian geriatric mental health research (Gupta & Pillai, 2021).

From a behavioural health perspective, this represents an important conceptual and clinical gap. Contemporary geriatric mental health frameworks emphasise that successful adaptation in later life involves more than the absence of psychological distress. Instead, adaptive functioning is shaped by behavioural regulation, cognitive appraisal, emotional flexibility, and the ability to derive meaning from life experiences (Windle, 2011; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However, relatively few Indian studies have examined how these behavioural pathways operate within the sociocultural realities of ageing. This limitation restricts the development of intervention models that strengthen adaptive capacity rather than focusing exclusively on symptom reduction.

Furthermore, cultural and relational influences that are highly relevant within Indian society remain insufficiently incorporated into integrative models of resilience. Family relationships, interdependence, and spiritual belief systems play a central role in shaping older adults' perceptions of adversity and coping responses (Pandya, 2018; Lamb, 2014). These culturally embedded resources may enhance emotional acceptance, foster psychological continuity, and promote meaning-oriented adaptation. Nevertheless, existing research often examines these elements independently, without situating them within comprehensive behavioural frameworks that explain how resilience develops and is sustained over time.

The absence of integrative conceptual models has implications for both clinical practice and public health planning. Without a clear understanding of behavioural pathways supporting resilience, geriatric mental health services may remain predominantly deficit-focused. Developing a synthesis that connects coping behaviour, cognitive processes, emotional regulation, and sociocultural influences can support more holistic approaches to mental health care. Such frameworks are particularly relevant in India, where demographic ageing,

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changing family structures, and increased life expectancy are reshaping psychological needs among older adults (Government of India, 2021).

The present conceptual review addresses this gap by synthesising theoretical and empirical literature on resilience and psychological adaptation in older adults, with particular emphasis on behavioural pathways and cultural context. By integrating insights from lifespan psychology, behavioural health, and geriatric mental health, this review aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of positive psychological adaptation in later life and to inform strength-based approaches to mental health promotion among older populations.

Method of Literature Search and Selection

This review adopts a narrative synthesis approach to examine behavioural and psychological pathways associated with resilience and adaptive functioning in older adulthood. Narrative reviews are particularly appropriate for integrating diverse theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks in areas where empirical findings span multiple disciplines (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). This approach enables examination of behavioural, cognitive, and sociocultural influences that may not be fully captured within narrowly defined systematic review methodologies.

A structured search strategy was implemented to identify relevant scholarly literature. Major electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar, were systematically searched to locate peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical papers, and review studies related to ageing, resilience, behavioural health, and psychological adaptation. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of psychological, medical, and interdisciplinary research relevant to geriatric mental health.

Search terms were used in multiple combinations to enhance retrieval breadth and included ageing, older adults, resilience, post-traumatic growth, psychological adaptation, behavioural health, coping, emotional regulation, social support, and geriatric mental health. Additional searches incorporated culturally relevant terms such as Indian older adults, spirituality and ageing, and family support in ageing to capture literature specific to the Indian sociocultural context. Reference lists of key articles were also examined to identify additional relevant sources, a strategy recommended for narrative synthesis in conceptual research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

Studies were included based on their conceptual relevance to resilience, behavioural adaptation, coping processes, and psychological wellbeing in older adults. Both empirical and theoretical contributions were considered to ensure comprehensive coverage of behavioural pathways supporting resilience. Qualitative and quantitative studies were included, as qualitative findings provide valuable insight into subjective experiences of adaptation, while quantitative research contributes evidence regarding psychological correlates and behavioural patterns (Windle, 2011).

Particular attention was given to literature examining ageing within collectivist and culturally embedded contexts, especially research conducted in India and comparable sociocultural environments. International literature was included to establish theoretical foundations and identify universally relevant behavioural mechanisms. Priority was given to peer-reviewed publications, influential theoretical models, and studies contributing to understanding adaptive psychological processes in later life.

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The selected literature was analysed thematically, focusing on recurring constructs such as emotional regulation, coping behaviour, social connectedness, cognitive adaptation, and meaning-making. Rather than aiming for exhaustive enumeration of all available studies, the review emphasises conceptual integration of representative and influential scholarship. This thematic synthesis supports development of a coherent framework explaining behavioural pathways to resilience and psychological adaptation in older adulthood.

Behavioural Determinants of Resilience in Later Life

Resilience in later life is increasingly understood as an adaptive psychological process that enables individuals to respond constructively to adversity while maintaining emotional stability and functional engagement. Rather than representing a fixed personality trait, resilience reflects a dynamic interaction between behavioural responses, cognitive interpretation, emotional regulation, and environmental influences (Windle, 2011; Bonanno, 2012). Within lifespan developmental perspectives, positive ageing is conceptualised not merely as the absence of illness or decline, but as the capacity to sustain meaning, emotional balance, and adaptive functioning despite the normative challenges associated with ageing (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010).

Behavioural coping strategies represent a primary pathway through which resilience is expressed. Coping involves the cognitive and behavioural efforts used to manage internal and external demands perceived as stressful (Folkman, 2013). Older adults frequently utilise adaptive coping mechanisms such as acceptance, problem-focused adjustment, and positive reinterpretation, which facilitate psychological adaptation and reduce emotional distress. These strategies enable individuals to engage constructively with changing circumstances while preserving a sense of personal continuity. In contrast, maladaptive responses such as avoidance, withdrawal, or persistent rumination may interfere with adjustment and contribute to psychological vulnerability (Aldwin et al., 2014). Importantly, coping patterns evolve across the lifespan, and accumulated life experience often enhances older adults' capacity to regulate behavioural responses effectively.

Cognitive appraisal and meaning-making represent another central behavioural pathway influencing resilience. Psychological outcomes are shaped not only by exposure to adversity but also by the subjective interpretation of those experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). When older adults interpret adversity within a broader life narrative, it becomes possible to integrate loss and change without disruption to core identity. Meaning-focused appraisal supports emotional acceptance, fosters psychological coherence, and enables individuals to maintain a sense of purpose. Lifespan theories suggest that later adulthood is characterised by increased reflective capacity, which facilitates reinterpretation of difficult experiences in ways that support emotional stability and psychological continuity (Carstensen, 1999; Charles, 2010).

Emotional regulation also plays a stabilising role in resilience processes. Research indicates that older adults often demonstrate enhanced ability to regulate emotional responses, selectively attend to emotionally meaningful experiences, and disengage from unnecessary sources of distress (Charles, 2010). Socioemotional Selectivity Theory proposes that with increasing awareness of time limitations, individuals prioritise emotionally meaningful goals and relationships, thereby supporting emotional wellbeing (Carstensen, 1999). Emotional regulation does not eliminate distress but allows individuals to contain emotional disruption

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while remaining psychologically engaged. This capacity serves as an important protective factor, facilitating adaptive functioning despite ongoing life transitions.

Social and relational environments further influence resilience, although their impact is mediated by individual psychological processes. Supportive relationships provide emotional reassurance, validation, and practical assistance that contribute to adaptive functioning (Antonucci et al., 2013). Perceived emotional support enhances psychological security and reinforces adaptive coping. However, research suggests that the perceived quality of relationships is more influential than the number of social contacts (Santini et al., 2015). Thus, social environments contribute to resilience by strengthening internal psychological resources rather than acting as independent determinants of adaptation.

Cultural and spiritual contexts represent particularly important influences in shaping behavioural pathways to resilience among Indian older adults. Cultural values emphasising interdependence, acceptance, and continuity of social roles provide interpretive frameworks that facilitate psychological adjustment (Gupta & Pillai, 2021). Spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and ritual participation may promote emotional regulation and meaning-making, thereby supporting adaptive functioning (Pandya, 2018). Family relationships continue to play a central role in shaping identity and purpose in later life, reinforcing resilience through relational meaning rather than individual independence.

Within this behavioural framework, post-traumatic growth may emerge as a potential outcome of adaptive psychological processes. Post-traumatic growth refers to positive psychological changes that occur through engagement with challenging life experiences, including increased personal strength, enhanced appreciation of life, and deeper interpersonal connections (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Katsogianni & Kleftras, 2015). Importantly, growth and vulnerability may coexist, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of psychological adaptation in later life.

By integrating behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural processes, this conceptual framework provides a comprehensive understanding of resilience in older adulthood. It highlights the importance of adaptive behavioural responses and meaning-centred coping in supporting psychological wellbeing. Such a perspective is essential for advancing strength-based approaches in geriatric mental health and promoting positive ageing within diverse cultural contexts.

Clinical Implications for Geriatric Mental Health Practice

The conceptual understanding of resilience as a dynamic, behaviourally mediated process carries significant implications for clinical practice with older adults. Traditional geriatric mental health interventions have primarily focused on symptom identification and reduction, particularly targeting depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline. While these clinical priorities remain essential, contemporary psychological perspectives emphasise the importance of recognising adaptive capacities, meaning-making processes, and behavioural adjustment as equally relevant therapeutic targets (Windle, 2011; Bonanno, 2012). Strength-oriented approaches do not negate distress; rather, they facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals maintain psychological equilibrium while navigating adversity. Integrating resilience-focused assessment and intervention allows clinicians to support not only symptom relief but also psychological adaptation and sustained wellbeing in later life.

Reframing Clinical Assessment

Clinical assessment traditionally emphasises diagnosis, symptom severity, and functional impairment. Although necessary for treatment planning, this deficit-focused orientation may overlook behavioural strengths that contribute to adaptation. Expanding assessment to include coping styles, emotional regulation patterns, perceived meaning, and adaptive responses provides a more holistic understanding of psychological functioning (Folkman, 2013; Aldwin et al., 2014). Such an approach enables clinicians to contextualise distress within the individual's broader adaptive capacity. This balanced formulation is particularly important in later life, where emotional distress often coexists with psychological resilience and accumulated experiential wisdom (Charles, 2010).

Illustrative Case 1: Reframing Loss and Identity: Mrs. S., a 68-year-old widow residing in an urban environment, sought consultation following persistent sadness and sleep disturbance after the loss of her spouse. Initial clinical impressions suggested depressive symptoms associated with bereavement. However, further exploration revealed that she had begun volunteering at a local library, which she described as providing structure and renewed social connection. Therapeutic work focused on acknowledging her grief while reinforcing adaptive behavioural engagement and emerging sources of meaning. Over time, she reported improved emotional stability and an evolving sense of identity that integrated both loss and renewed purpose.

This illustration reflects evidence that emotional distress and adaptive growth may occur simultaneously, highlighting the value of integrating strength-based perspectives into clinical formulation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Targeting Behavioural Pathways in Intervention

Interventions that strengthen adaptive behavioural and cognitive processes are particularly relevant for older adults. Evidence-based approaches such as problem-solving therapy, acceptance-based interventions, mindfulness practices, and narrative techniques support emotional regulation and adaptive coping (Aldwin et al., 2014; Windle et al., 2020). These therapeutic methods help individuals reinterpret adversity within a broader life context, facilitating psychological integration rather than avoidance. Such approaches align with developmental findings indicating that older adults often prioritise emotional stability, meaningful engagement, and preservation of psychological coherence (Carstensen, 1999).

Illustrative Case 2: Coping in Chronic Illness: Mr. R., a 72-year-old retired professional managing chronic cardiovascular illness, presented with anxiety related to perceived loss of autonomy. Despite stable medical status, he expressed concerns about dependency. Intervention focused on identifying controllable behaviours, including adherence to treatment routines and engagement in meaningful daily activities. Reflective discussion allowed him to situate illness within his broader life narrative, reinforcing continuity of identity. This process supported emotional adjustment and reduced anxiety related to perceived vulnerability.

This case illustrates how behavioural activation and cognitive reframing contribute to adaptive functioning in the context of chronic health conditions, consistent with resilience-based therapeutic models (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010).

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Supporting Adaptation during Role Transitions and Caregiving

Later life frequently involves transitions in social roles, including caregiving responsibilities. While caregiving may contribute to emotional strain, it can also provide opportunities for meaning and relational engagement. Clinical approaches that acknowledge both stress and adaptive potential help prevent unnecessary pathologisation of normal emotional responses. Supporting caregivers in recognising their adaptive capacities may enhance psychological endurance and reduce emotional exhaustion (Gupta & Pillai, 2021).

Illustrative Case 3: Growth within Caregiving: Mrs. A., a 70-year-old caregiver for her spouse with dementia, reported fatigue and emotional strain. Therapeutic exploration focused not only on caregiver burden but also on her reflections regarding increased patience and emotional strength developed through caregiving. Recognising these adaptive psychological changes did not eliminate caregiving challenges but supported emotional resilience and sustained engagement in her caregiving role.

This example highlights how meaning-focused reflection can strengthen psychological adaptation, even in demanding caregiving contexts (Pandya, 2018).

Cultural Sensitivity and Meaning-Oriented Care

Culturally responsive care represents a critical component of geriatric mental health practice, particularly within the Indian context. Cultural values related to interdependence, spiritual belief, and continuity of family roles significantly influence how older adults interpret adversity and emotional distress (Gupta & Pillai, 2021). Spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and philosophical reflection may facilitate emotional regulation and acceptance (Pandya, 2018). Clinicians who respectfully engage with these cultural frameworks can enhance therapeutic alliance and improve treatment relevance. Integrating culturally meaningful narratives into therapeutic work supports emotional integration and reinforces adaptive psychological functioning.

Integrating Resilience into Clinical Practice

Overall, resilience-informed clinical practice involves recognising adaptive capacities alongside psychological distress. Therapeutic goals may include strengthening coping flexibility, supporting emotional regulation, reinforcing meaningful engagement, and facilitating coherent life narratives. Such approaches align with lifespan developmental perspectives that emphasise ongoing psychological adaptation across adulthood (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). By incorporating behavioural and meaning-oriented interventions, clinicians can promote psychological wellbeing and adaptive functioning in older adults, supporting positive ageing within diverse clinical and cultural contexts.

Indian Context and Cultural Pathways to Resilience

Understanding resilience among older adults in India requires attention to the cultural, relational, and spiritual environments within which ageing occurs. Psychological adaptation in later life does not emerge solely from individual coping abilities but is shaped by deeply embedded cultural values, social expectations, and collective meaning systems. Indian society has traditionally emphasised interdependence, continuity of family roles, and reverence for elders, all of which influence how older adults interpret adversity and sustain psychological equilibrium (Gupta & Pillai, 2021). These socio-cultural structures provide not only practical support but also symbolic frameworks that reinforce identity, belonging, and purpose.

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Family remains one of the most influential determinants of psychological experience in later life. Unlike highly individualised social systems, Indian family structures have historically been organised around collective functioning, with older adults occupying roles associated with guidance, moral authority, and intergenerational continuity. Although urbanisation and migration have contributed to shifts toward nuclear family arrangements, emotional connectedness and familial responsibility continue to shape ageing experiences (Srivastava et al., 2020). Even when physical proximity is reduced, perceived emotional support from family members contributes to psychological stability and resilience. This relational orientation provides older adults with a sense of continuity and meaning, which can buffer the emotional impact of loss, illness, or changing functional capacity.

Spirituality represents another central pathway through which resilience is expressed in the Indian context. Religious practices, philosophical reflection, and spiritual beliefs offer interpretive frameworks that help individuals contextualise suffering within broader existential narratives (Pandya, 2018). Concepts such as acceptance, impermanence, and life purpose, which are embedded within Indian philosophical traditions, may facilitate emotional integration and reduce psychological distress during periods of transition. Spiritual engagement has been associated with increased emotional balance, reduced anxiety, and greater acceptance of uncontrollable circumstances (Sharma & Singh, 2022). Rather than functioning solely as ritual activity, spirituality often serves as a cognitive and emotional resource that supports adaptive meaning-making.

Cultural narratives surrounding ageing also influence psychological adaptation. Older adulthood in India is frequently associated with wisdom, reflection, and moral maturity, providing an alternative narrative to deficit-oriented models of decline. These cultural meanings can reinforce self-worth and reduce the internalisation of age-related stigma. When older adults perceive their lives as meaningful and socially valued, they may demonstrate greater psychological resilience, even in the presence of physical or functional challenges (Raj & Kumari, 2020). Such culturally embedded narratives contribute to the preservation of identity and emotional stability during later life transitions.

At the same time, rapid social transformation has introduced new challenges that influence resilience pathways. Urbanisation, migration of younger family members, and changing economic structures have altered traditional caregiving arrangements. Older adults may experience increased isolation, reduced social participation, or perceived loss of social role, particularly in urban environments (Patel & Chauhan, 2020). These changes highlight the dynamic interaction between cultural continuity and social transition. Despite these challenges, many older adults demonstrate adaptive flexibility by redefining roles, engaging in community activities, or cultivating new sources of meaning.

Community-based social and spiritual engagement further contributes to psychological adaptation. Participation in religious gatherings, senior citizen associations, and neighbourhood networks provides opportunities for social interaction, emotional expression, and identity reinforcement. Such engagement supports emotional wellbeing and reduces perceived loneliness, both of which are closely linked to resilience (Santini et al., 2015). Importantly, these collective environments reinforce shared meaning, allowing older adults to interpret personal adversity within broader social and cultural narratives.

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Resilience in the Indian context therefore reflects an interaction between individual behavioural processes and culturally mediated sources of meaning. Coping strategies, emotional regulation, and cognitive appraisal operate within relational and spiritual environments that shape psychological adaptation. This integrative perspective suggests that resilience cannot be fully understood without considering cultural identity, social belonging, and existential meaning. Recognising these pathways is essential for developing culturally responsive mental health interventions that align with the lived experiences of older adults in India.

By situating resilience within its socio-cultural context, this perspective challenges purely individualistic models of psychological adaptation. It highlights the importance of relational meaning, spiritual engagement, and cultural continuity in sustaining psychological wellbeing. Such an approach supports the development of geriatric mental health practices that are both scientifically grounded and culturally relevant, reinforcing positive ageing as a process shaped by behavioural, relational, and cultural resources.

Directions for Future Research

The increasing emphasis on resilience and adaptive functioning in later life highlights the need for research that moves beyond illness-centred models toward a more comprehensive understanding of psychological adaptation. Although existing geriatric mental health literature has documented the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and functional limitations among older adults, comparatively less attention has been directed toward the behavioural and meaning-oriented processes that enable individuals to maintain psychological equilibrium despite adversity (Windle, 2011; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Future research would benefit from integrative frameworks that examine resilience as a multidimensional process shaped by behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and socio-cultural influences rather than isolated variables.

Longitudinal research designs represent a particularly important priority for advancing knowledge in this area. Much of the current evidence is derived from cross-sectional observations, which provide limited insight into how resilience develops, stabilises, or transforms over time. Longitudinal studies examining transitions such as retirement, bereavement, chronic illness, or caregiving can clarify the temporal dynamics of adaptation and identify factors that contribute to sustained psychological wellbeing (Bonanno, 2012). Such designs would also help distinguish between short-term adjustment and enduring psychological growth, thereby refining theoretical models of positive ageing.

Greater methodological diversity is also needed to capture the complexity of resilience in later life. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches can illuminate subjective experiences, personal meaning systems, and culturally embedded interpretations that may not be fully accessible through quantitative measures alone (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Narrative and phenomenological methods, in particular, allow older adults to articulate their own perspectives on adaptation, identity continuity, and psychological growth. These approaches are especially relevant in culturally diverse contexts such as India, where social relationships, cultural expectations, and spiritual beliefs play a central role in shaping psychological experience (Gupta & Pillai, 2021).

Future research should also examine specific behavioural mechanisms that support resilience. Coping strategies, emotional regulation practices, health behaviours, and patterns

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of social engagement represent modifiable processes that may influence psychological adaptation (Folkman, 2013; Aldwin et al., 2014). Investigating how these behavioural pathways interact with contextual factors such as physical health, socioeconomic conditions, and social support can contribute to more comprehensive models of adaptation. Understanding both protective and constraining influences will enable the development of interventions that support adaptive functioning while acknowledging the realities of vulnerability in later life.

Cultural context represents another essential dimension for future inquiry. Although theoretical models of resilience and post-traumatic growth have been developed primarily within Western settings, their applicability to Indian populations requires careful examination. Cultural values related to interdependence, spirituality, and continuity of social roles may shape adaptive processes in distinct ways (Pandya, 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2022). Comparative studies examining diverse cultural, regional, and social environments within India would enhance understanding of variability in ageing experiences and resilience pathways.

Intervention-focused research also remains an important priority. While resilience-enhancing approaches such as mindfulness-based interventions, problem-solving therapy, and meaning-centred counselling have shown promise, further investigation is needed to evaluate their effectiveness among older adults in community and clinical settings (Windle et al., 2020). Research that examines outcomes such as psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction, and perceived meaning, in addition to symptom reduction, would provide a more comprehensive assessment of intervention impact.

Finally, future work should aim to strengthen the translation of theoretical knowledge into clinical and community practice. Developing assessment tools and intervention models grounded in resilience-based frameworks can support clinicians in adopting strength-oriented approaches to geriatric mental health care (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Aligning research priorities with the needs of ageing populations and healthcare systems will contribute to more effective and culturally responsive mental health services.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual review integrates behavioural, developmental, and cultural perspectives to advance understanding of resilience and psychological adaptation among older adults, with particular relevance to the Indian context. In contrast to deficit-focused models that have traditionally emphasised decline and vulnerability, contemporary geriatric mental health perspectives recognise ageing as a complex developmental phase characterised by both challenge and adaptive capacity (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). By synthesising literature on resilience, coping, emotional regulation, and post-traumatic growth, the present review highlights ageing as a dynamic psychological process involving ongoing adjustment, meaning-making, and potential for growth.

A key contribution of this review lies in its emphasis on behavioural pathways as mechanisms underlying psychological resilience. Resilience is conceptualised not as a fixed personality characteristic but as an evolving process shaped by coping responses, cognitive interpretation, emotional regulation, and social context (Windle, 2011; Folkman, 2013). These processes enable older adults to preserve psychological coherence and emotional balance despite adversity. Post-traumatic growth, within this framework, is understood as a

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possible outcome of adaptive engagement with challenging life circumstances rather than an inevitable consequence (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

The review also underscores the importance of cultural context in shaping resilience among Indian older adults. Family relationships, spiritual beliefs, and culturally embedded narratives provide interpretive frameworks that facilitate meaning-making and emotional integration (Gupta & Pillai, 2021; Pandya, 2018). These cultural influences highlight the need for contextually grounded models of resilience that reflect the lived realities of ageing within diverse social environments. Recognising culturally mediated pathways enhances both conceptual understanding and practical relevance.

From a clinical perspective, the findings support the integration of strength-based approaches into geriatric mental health care. Assessing adaptive capacities alongside psychological distress allows clinicians to develop more comprehensive formulations and interventions. Interventions that support adaptive coping, emotional regulation, and meaning-centred reflection can enhance psychological wellbeing and promote adaptive functioning (Aldwin et al., 2014). Such approaches align with contemporary mental health frameworks that emphasise wellbeing, dignity, and psychological continuity across the lifespan.

At broader societal levels, these insights have implications for community programs and public health policy. Promoting social engagement, fostering supportive environments, and recognising the psychological strengths of older adults can contribute to healthier ageing populations. Strengthening resilience-focused approaches complements traditional medical and welfare models by addressing psychological and behavioural determinants of wellbeing. In conclusion, resilience represents a fundamental component of positive ageing rather than an exceptional outcome. Older adulthood should be understood as a stage characterised not only by vulnerability but also by adaptive potential and psychological growth. By reframing ageing within a strength-based and culturally informed perspective, this review contributes to a more balanced and humane understanding of later life. Such an orientation supports the development of geriatric mental health practices that promote dignity, meaning, and psychological wellbeing in an ageing society.

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Conflict of Interest

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