POSITIVE THINKING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG THE ELDERLY IN BENUE STATE

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Abstract

The adverse effect of psychological distress on the elderly cannot be overemphasized as it poses a global public health challengeand those who lack the ability to think positively are highly probable to negative attitudes, suicidal ideation, increased symptoms of depression, stress and anxiety. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and investigated positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. The simple random sampling technique was used to sample six (6) Local Government Areas of the State while purposive sampling was used to sample three hundred and six (306) elderly people who participated in the study; 225 (73.5%) males and 81 (26.5%) females. The Positivity Scale and Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) were used for data collection. The hypothesis was formulated and tested using Regression Analysis. On the whole, positive thinking plays a significant role on psychological distress among the elderly. On the dimensions, having confidence in the future was not statisticallysignificant to psychological distress while self-confidence and satisfaction were statistically significant to psychological distress. It was concluded that positive thinking determines psychological distress among the elderly. It was recommended thathence positive thinking can be learned according to learning theory, constant and conscious practice will lead to positive feelings, then to good health, happiness, physical and psychological health. This can be done through the use of seminars/workshops for government workers who are about to retireby clinical psychologists and other mental health professionals to help the elderly practice positive thinking consciously.

Key Words: Positive thinking, Psychological distress, Elderly, Benue State.

Introduction

Psychological distress isa serious mental health issue, if untreated can cause adverse mental health challenges. Globally, 1 in 8 persons are living with psychological distress condition (depression, anxiety, stress) which impaired their physical health, well-being, relationship with others and the livelihood across all ages; adolescents, adult and the elderly (World Health Organization, WHO 2023). Meanwhile, the prevalence of psychological distress and its associated factors vary across the globe. Over one million people are living with distress, depression, anxiety symptoms and more than 75% of the people with such challenges do not receive treatment and most of them are the elderly (World Health Organization, 2021; Daly & Macchia, 2023)193 million people living with depression to 246 million people worldwide which is 28% anxiety symptoms grew from about 298 million people affected to 374 million people which is about a 25% increase (Mental Health Statistics and Facts,

2023) and impacted the global economy in $1 trillion in lost productivity yearly. Thus, psychological distress is highly prevalent among the elderly and affecting people across all regions of the world (WHO, 2023) which pose a major challenge to humanity.

There are limited studies conducted on psychological distress in Africa among the elderly and the prevalence in Africa is sharply increasing as the economic and situational factors in both male and female and across all ages (Abdeta, Birhanu, Kibret, Alemu, Bayu, Bogale, Meseret, Dechasa, Wonidimneh, Abinew, Lami, Wedaje, Bete, Gemechu, Nigussie, Negash, Dirisa, Berhanu, Husen, Eyeberu, Godnana, Dessie, Sertsu, Hiko, Asfaw, Dereje&Nigussie, 2023; Simegn, Sisay, Seid&Dagne, 2023). Meanwhile, in the Sub-Saharan Africa where Nigeria is located, it is estimated that the number of elderly people will rise from 67 million by 2025 and 163 million by 2050 (WHO, 2021) thus the increase of psychological distress issues in Nigeria.

Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and home to over 222, 486, 000 million people (Nwankwo, 2023). Psychological distress is common across the States in Nigeria and the most serious causes of morbidity and mortality globally (Nochaiwong, Ruengorn, Thavorn, Hutton, Awiphan, Phosuya, Ruanta, Wongpakaran, &Wongpakaran, 2021;Chiahemba, Terwase & Inembe, 2022) which poses a major challenge to humanity.

The adverse effect of psychological distress in Benue State is a concern and the high proportion of sub-threshold symptoms recorded across different local Government Areas and communities in the State has increase vulnerability of the citizens of the State (Edeh, Uwakwe, Obindo, Agbir & Akanni, 2023; Awopetu, Annor, Ingyer & Ayankaa, 2016) and frequently reported outcome among the populace of the State. Meanwhile, the number of elderly people is predicted to rise from 6.4 million to 25.5 million by 2050 (Nmadu, Omole, Joshua, Mohammad-Idris &Adiri, 2018). These pose a great challenge to Benue State. According to Islam (2019), elderly people are more prompt to psychological distress.

Positive thinking is known to enhance individual stability (Kahrazie & Akbarizadeh, 2020). The researcher observed that positive thinking reduces stress, improve immunity and lower risk for heart diseases across all ages and most importantly among the elderly. Positive attitude towards self, society and life generally improves life outcome, life satisfaction and psychological distress (Stibich, 2020).

Positive thinking is an intervention that affects physical and mental health, positively, increases happiness (Ahangarzadeh, Nematolahei & Oladrostam, 2017). Nevertheless, negative thinking distracts an individual's mind from producing defensive reactions against negative emotions and as such the individual become psychologically distressed (Kahrazie & Akbarizadeh, 2020).The frustration faced by the elderly people who have served the nation and retired without been supported by the Government, Organizations and others represent a tip of the iceberg of the various challenges facing

older persons and calls for urgent attention and action (Animasahun & Chapman, 2017), this also post a great psychological challenge as they engage in critical evaluation of their lives (Yildirim & Arslan, 2020). These poses a great challenge among the elderly as they are unable to focus on good thoughts in difficult situations and in times of need is a concern among the elderly in Benue State as it leads to psychological distress and risk to other health complications. Thus the research examined positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly people in Benue State.

Statement of the Problem

The adverse effect of psychological distress on the elderly cannot be overemphasized as it poses a global public health challenge (WHO, 2023). It has been observed that when the elderly compare their past and present through positive thinking, they are likely to be predisposed to psychological distress. The researcher observed that positive thinking plays a vital role in stability generally and as such could the elderly positive thinking differs on psychological distress? Therefore, the researcherexamined positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly as to proffer constructive solutions to personaland societal challenges in regards to psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State, Nigeria and Africa at large.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. The objective is as follows:

i.   To examine the influence of positive thinking and its dimensions on psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State.

Research Questions

The following research questionshall guide the study:

i.   To what extent will positive thinking and its dimensions influence psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State?

Significance of the Study

The study shall be useful to the elderly and their care givers to know the role of positive thinking and psychological distress among elderly people and to help them and their relatives cope with the challenges of psychological distress that accompanies aging and other related factors. The study shall help Clinical psychologists and the researcher to know the appropriate psychotherapeutic guide and intervention plan to help manage psychological distress issues among the elderly.

For policy makers, the study will highlight and recommend feasible, practicable and workable solutions to problems associated with psychological distress among elderly people. This way, it will help reduce the scourge of depression, anxiety and distress particularly among the older adults and will serve as reference material upon which future researchers could base their studies.

Scope of the Study

The study is limited to examining positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. The study variables include positive thinking as independent variablewhile psychological

distress remains the dependent variable. The geographic location of the study was Benue State in which the three geopolitical zones within the State were represented in the study with two Local Government Area each: Benue North-East Senatorial Zone (Zone A) covered by Ushongo and Kwande Local Government Areas, Benue North-West Senatorial Zone (Zone B) which comprised of Makurdi and Gwer-East Local Government Areas and Benue South Senatorial Zone (Zone C) covered by Otukpo and Okpokwu Local Government Areas. The selection of the Local Government Areas within Benue State was done through a simple random sampling to avoid bias in the selection process. The study duration was between January, 2022 to October, 2023.

Operational Definition of Terms
Psychological Distress refers to feelings of sadness, low mood, emptiness, worry, sleeplessness, hopelessness, nervousness (reckless acts) of the elderly. Also, the term describes unpleasant feelings or emotions that affect the elderly level of optimal functioning as measured by the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21). The low score on DASS-21 indicate emotional stability (psychological well-being) and high score indicates psychological distress (depression, anxiety & stress).

Positive Thinking refers to the elderly people's views and perception (the past, the present and the future) about life. The construct was measured using positive thinking scale which means that a high score will indicate that the elderly thinkpositive of the world, self and other people around them while low score indicates that the elderly sees much that is negative in the world, self and other people. The score ranges from 8 (most negative thinking) to 40 (Most positive thinking).

Elderly refers to older persons (males or females) who aged 60 years and above, who have served in the public or private or traditional sector and have retired on the basis of service fixed age of sixty (60) years or thirty-five (35) years of unbroken active service or still service. In addition, for judicial officers and academic staff of tertiary institutions 65 years and 70 years respectively shall be considered.

Theoretical Review

Behavioral-Cognitive Theory
According to the Behavioral-cognitive theory, negatively biased cognition is a core process in psychological distress (Barlow & Durand, 1999). This process is reflected when distressed person typically have a negative view of themselves, their environment and the future (Weinrach, 1988). They view themselves as worthless, inadequate, unlovable and deficient. According to the cognitive theorists, people's excessive affect and dysfunctional behavior is due to excessive or inappropriate ways of interpreting their experiences. Basic **assumption** of Behavioral-**cognitive theory** is that maladaptive **behavior** results from irrational or distorted way of thinking, emphasis on internal thought processes. Emphasis on "Here and now" principles-it is usually more fruitful to focus on current processes rather than the past (Barlow, el at.,1999).The theory can be used to explain the cause of psychological distress among

elderly people since, the theory explained that what make an individual behave abnormal is as a result of irrational or distorted way of thinking that may manifest in our conduct with others and constant evaluation of the past achievements. Therefore, elders who ascertain their ageing period must be emotionally free if they are to overcome psychological distress by focusing on the current and looking forward on how to maintain the here and now.

The theory of Learned optimism and learned helplessness

The theory was developed by Seligman, (1991). Learned optimism is the idea in positive psychology that a talent of joy like any other can be cultivated. He maintained that learned optimism is a thought process and contrasted with learned helplessness; learned optimism is done by consciously challenging any negative self-talk (thought). According to the principles of the theory, optimists are higher achievers and it enhance their overall health: physical and psychological. Therefore, learning to be optimistic by thinking positive about self and the society enhance psychological well-being. Nevertheless, where the elderly arenot optimistic, they may not be conscious of challenging their self-negative talk (thoughts) and psychological distress: depression, anxiety and stress may set in.

Hypothesis:

The study tested the hypothesis:

i. There will be significant influence of positive thinking and its dimensions on psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State.

Method

Design: The researcher adopted cross-sectional survey design for the study. This is most suitable because the researcher did not intend to manipulate any variable but instead use questionnaires to collect data at a specific point in time.

Setting: Benue State is one of the north central states in Nigeria with land area of $34,059\text{km}^2$ and population of 6,141,300 according to National Population Commission (2022). The state derives its name from the Benue river which is the second largest river in Nigeria and with the nation's acclaimed 'food basket' because of its rich agricultural produce which includes yam, rice, beans, cassava, sweet-potato, maize, soya-bean, sorghum, millet, cocoyam. The state has makurdi as the capital with (23) twenty-three Local Government Areas divided into three (3) senatorial zones known as Benue North-east, (Zone A) Benue North-west (Zone B) and Benue South-South (Zone C).

Sampling

The multistage sampling stage was adopted for the study; simple random sampling was usedfor the selection of Local Government Areas within the State and purposive sampling was used to select participants (the elderly) residing within the selected Local Government Areas of Benue State.

Participants

The participants for the study were representative sample size which was determined based on National Population Commission of Nigeria (web, 2022) and National Bureau of Statistics (web, 2022). A

total of three hundred and six (306) participants were drawn from Kwande, Ushongo, Makurdi, Gwer-East, Otukpo and Okpokwu. Three hundred and six (306), 225 (73.5%) males and 81 (26.5%) females were selected across the six (6) Local Government Areas in Benue State. The study showed that 269 (87.9%) were married, 19 (6.2%) were separated, 10 (3.3%) were divorced and only 8 (2.6%) were single. Among them, 283 (92.5%) were Christians, 11 (3.6%) were Muslim and 12 (3.9%) were Traditionalists. The educational qualification of the participants showed that 89 (29.1%) had SSCE, 87 (28.4%) had OND/ND/NCE, 96 (31.4%) had HND/B.Sc, 32 (10.5%) had M.Sc/M.A/P.GD and 2 (.7) had Ph.D. It was also shown that 212 (69.3%) of the participants retired from active service, 90 (29.4%) were in active service and 4 (1.3%) were in others. This implies that majority of the participants were retired from active service on the basis of age.

Instruments

The instrument used for this study was the questionnaire which was divided into three sections: section 'A' for bio-data, section 'B' for positivity scale and section 'C' for depression, anxiety and stress scale.

The positivity scale

The positivity Scale was designed to directly assess positivity. The 8-item scale measures the tendency to view life and experiences with a positive outlook. The items assess positive view of one's self, one's life and one's future as well as one's confidence in others. The scale is measured on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The scale has a reliability coefficient of .75 Cronbach's alpha. The score ranges from 8 (most negative thinking) to 40 (most positive thinking). Based on the study, high score will indicates that the elderly think positive of the self, the world, and others around while low score indicates that the elderly sees much that is negative in world, self, and others.

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21)

The DASS-21 was developed by Lovibond & Lovibond (1995) and designed to measure the emotional state of depression, anxiety and stress (Psychological distress). The depression scale assess dysphoria, hopelessness, devaluation of life, self-depreciation, lack of interest/involvement, anhedonia, and inertia. The anxiety scale assesses automatic arousal skeletal muscles effects, situational anxiety, and subjective experience of anxious affect. The stress scale is sensitive to levels of chronic non-specific aroused. It assesses difficulty relating, nervous arousal, and being easily upset/agitated, irritable/over-reactive and impatient. The scores are calculated by summarizing the scores. The scale items show the symptoms & signs of psychological distress which are categorical: depression, anxiety and stress. The scale's reliability is .87 Cronbach's alpha. High scores implies severe psychological distress and low scores indicate stability (psychologically well-being).

Procedure

Prior to the administration of the study questionnaires, the researcher presented a letter of introduction to seek for permission from traditional council, associations and

groups that housed the elderly in Benue State. The researcher recruited and trained five (5) research assistants to play a supportive role in the process of data collection. The instrument was compiled into a questionnaire with three sections: Demographic information, Positivity and Depression Anxiety Stress Questionnaire was used to collect data among the elderly in Benue State.

After the training, the researcher and the assistants used simple random sampling to select six Local Government Areas and purposive sampling was used to sample 306 elderly for the study The copies of questionnaire were administered to the elderly through face to face approach and on-the-spot administration approach was adopted, where the participants were attended to one at a time while group administration was carried out for those who could read and understand by themselves. The researcher also assured the participants of their absolute and maximum confidentiality. This technique was adopted in line with other quality control measures such as permission and informed consent from the participants, where only the

participants who accepted and signed the consent form were allowed to participate. Therefore, the researcher and the assistants collected copies of the questionnaires after full completion by the participants and presented for data analysis.

This process was done in all the selected Local Government Areas. Debriefing was done before administering the copies of the questionnaire to the participants and psycho-educated on importance of mental health among the elderly as a service to the humanity while enhancing and promoting the wealth in the elderly. Their responses was based on willingness to attend to the questionnaire which constitute the data for the study for analysis and result presentation.

Data Analysis
Data collected for the study was analyzed via Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS, version 20). The simple multiple linear regression was used to test the hypothesis formulated for the study. The demographic information of the participants were analyzed suing descriptive statistics.

RESULTS
Table 1a: Summary Table of Linear Regression Analysis showing the role of positive thinking on psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State.

Variable	Df	β	t	Sig
Constant	1,300		3.439	.001
Positive Thinking		.319	5.835	.000

Dependent Variable: Psychological Distress.
The result in Table 1a indicated that positive thinking played a significant role on psychological distress among the elderly in

Benue State β=.319, t=5.835;P<.01. Meanwhile, positive thinking accounted for 31.9% of the total variation on psychological distress. This implies that positive thinking has the capacity to reduce the effect of

psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. Nevertheless, since there is distinction between the thought and reality, the elderly people only thinks positive but are not living the positive lifestyle they think likely. Furthermore, the dimensions of positive thinking are shown in Table 1b.

Dependent Variable: Psychological

Table 1b: Summary Table of Linear Multiple Regression Analysis showing the role of all the dimensions of positive thinking on psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State.

Variable	R	R2	df	F	Sig	β	t	Sig
Constant	.329	.108	2,300	18.202	.000		4.276	.000
Confidence in the Future						.040	.716	.475
Self-Confidence & Satisfaction						.317	5.627	.000

Distress

The result in Table 1b shows that confidence in the future is statistically not significant to psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State β=.040, t=.716;P>.05. This means that at 60years and above, the elderly no longer think of a future hence they are already at their peak in life and as such it's the time to evaluate their life achievements. Also, self-confidence and satisfaction were statistically significant to psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State β=.317, t=5.627;P<.01. The result further shows that self-confidence and satisfaction accounted for 31.7% of psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. This implies that as the elderly in Benue State have confidence in themselves aresatisfied with what they have they become more psychologically stable. The result also show that confidence in the future and self-confidence jointly and significantly influenced Psychological distress R =.329, R^2 = .108: F =(2,300) 18.202; p < .01. The result further shows that the two dimensions of positive thinking contributed 10.8% of the total variance in Psychological distress.Therefore, the hypothesis was accepted and confirmed.

Discussion

The study examined positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State and the findings are discussed based on the stated hypothesis. The hypothesis which states that there will be a significant influence of positive thinking and its dimensions on psychological distress among the elderly in Benue state was statistically significant and confirmed. This implies that positive thinking has the capacity to reduce the effect of psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. Nevertheless, the research established that there is a difference between the ideal and the reality- the elderly people are only thinking positive but they are not living the positive reality of what they are living due to their condition since the majority of the participants were retired personnel. The current findings supported the work of Aulia and Widyana (2022) and Kianpour, Amini, Keykhorovani and Shafiabadi (2022) as they established that positive thinking significantly reduce psychological distress of older patients. It therefore means that training the elderly to think positive will reduce their level of depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms and stressors that will make them

to become distressed psychologically.

In the same direction, Shokrpour, Sheidaie, Amirkhani, Bazrafkan and Modreki (2021) maintained that positive thinking reduces the impact of stress, anxiety and depression (Psychological distress) among the elderly. Also Pourdavarani, Farokhzadian, Farokhazadian, Forouz and Shahraki (2021) pointed that positive thinking reduces psychological distress and enhance quality of life and happiness of the elderly people. The pervious findings supported the current study among the elderly in Benue State by establishing a significant influence of positive thinking on psychological distress. Uniquely, the current study pointed thatthe elderly no longer think of a future hence they are already at their peak in life and as such they have nothing to be distressed about but lack of self confidence in themselves and satisfaction with what they have may trigger psychologically distress.

Conclusion

It was concluded that positive thinking reduces psychological distress of the elderly to a barest minimum while those elderly people who have confidence in themselves and satisfied with what they have become more psychologically stable than those that have confidence in the future.

Implications

The need for psychological well-being (mental health) among the elderly is timely as the world, Africa, Nigeria and Benue State is faced with challenging situations that predisposed them to psychological distress but the role of positive thinkinghas filled the gap in literature regarding the psychological distress among the elderly. The study has helped the elderly, their caregivers, clinical psychologists, policy makers and NGOs to know the role of positive thinking to reduce psychological distress and enhance mental well-being.

Limitations

The data collected was in form of self-reports and only the elderly people residing in six (6) Local Government Area of Benue State were sampled as participants while the elderly in seventeen (17) Local Government Area of the State were restricted. This could affect the external validity of the findings. Further studies should consider other local governments areas of the state not sampled to expand the scope to cover the twenty-three (23) Local Government Areas.

The study was also limited to positive thinking and psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. Further research should investigate the moderating role of positive thinking on isolation and psychological distress.

Recommendations

The current finding shows that positive thinking enhance psychological well-being of the elderly by reducing distress. The researcher recommended that measures should be taken to psycho-educate the elderly on the important role positive thinking has on their mental health in order to reduce depressive and anxiety symptoms. Hence positive thinking can be learned according to learning theory. Constant and conscious practice will lead to positive feelings, then to good health, happiness and then health; physical and psychological

health. This can be done through the use of seminars/workshops for government workers about to retire and in association and organizations that house the elderly by clinical psychologists and other mental health professionals to learn and practice thinking positive consciously.

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