

Successful Aging Among Older Veterans in the United States

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Objective: *To develop a unidimensional latent model of successful aging and to evaluate sociodemographic, medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial correlates of this construct in a nationally representative sample of older veterans in the United States.*

Methods: *Data were analyzed from a cross-sectional web survey of 2,025 U.S. veterans aged 60 to 96 years who participated in the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study. Self-report measures of sociodemographics; subjective physical, mental, and cognitive functioning; and psychosocial characteristics were used. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to construct a unidimensional latent factor of successful aging. Correlates of scores on this factor were then evaluated. Results: Most older veterans (82.1%) rated themselves as aging successfully. A unidimensional latent factor composed of seven measures of self-rated successful aging, quality of life, and physical, mental, cognitive, and social functioning provided a good fit to the data. Physical health difficulties ($\beta = -0.39$) and current psychological distress ($\beta = -0.33$) were most strongly negatively related to scores on this latent factor of successful aging, while protective psychosocial characteristics ($\beta = 0.22$), most notably resilience, gratitude, and purpose in life, were most strongly positively related to these scores. Additional positive predictors of successful aging included White, non-Hispanic race, being married or living with partner, perceiving a positive effect of the military on one's life, active lifestyle, positive expectations regarding aging, and conscientiousness; additional negative predictors included substance abuse history.*

Conclusion: *Results of this study provide a dimensional approach to characterizing components and correlates of successful aging in older veterans. Interventions and policy initiatives designed to mitigate physical health difficulties and psychological distress and to enhance protective psychosocial characteristics such as resilience, gratitude, and purpose in life may help promote successful aging in this population.*

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INTRODUCTION

The older adult population is undergoing unprecedented growth worldwide, which will create a dramatic shift in the age distribution over the next several decades. According to the U.S. Census Bureau,¹ the world population of adults age 65 and older is projected to triple by mid-century, from 516 million in 2009 to 1.53 billion in 2050. Aging of the veteran population in the United States has outpaced that of the general population. From 1990 to 2007, the proportion of veterans aged 65 and over increased from 27.0% to 39.3%; during the same time period, the proportion of individuals aged 65 and over in the general population increased from 10.3% to 12.6%.¹ Over the next 30 years, it is estimated that the percentage of older veterans will double to represent more than 50% of the total veteran population.^{2,3} This rapid increase in older veterans is significant, because older veterans consume a disproportionate share of Veterans Administration healthcare services and resources.^{3,4}

Although rates of disease and disability will undoubtedly increase as the population grows older, there is growing awareness that a substantial proportion of older adults continue to function at a high level and are thus "aging successfully."⁵⁻⁹ Successful aging, which is characterized by optimal physical, cognitive, and social functioning, has generated increasing interest over the past two decades.⁵⁻¹⁹ Several authorities, including the World Health Organization, White House Conference on Aging, National Institute on Aging, and United Nations Research Agenda on Ageing for the 21st Century, have underscored the need for research on correlates of successful aging that extend beyond the absence of disease and disability.⁶ Despite these policy documents that conceptualize aging in positive terms, empirical research to date has focused predominantly on the prevalence and correlates of morbidity and mortality. Further, although a burgeoning body of research has examined the prevalence and correlates of successful aging in civilian samples of community-dwelling older adults,^{8-10,12,16,18} we are aware of no study that has investigated this phenomenon in older veterans. Such an examination is important in light of evidence suggesting that veterans often have higher rates of physical and mental morbidities and functional

impairment.^{3,20-22} Understanding the sociodemographic, medical, psychological, cognitive, and social correlates of successful aging in older veterans will guide the development of health and wellness programs to help improve health and functional outcomes in this population.

A broad array of demographic, medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial correlates of successful aging have been identified in civilian older adults. These include demographic factors such as younger age; physical health factors such as low burden of medical illness, high cognitive functioning, and nonsmoking; psychiatric factors such as low depressive and anxiety symptoms; and psychosocial factors such as high social support.^{5-7,19} Importantly, although some of these correlates (i.e., absence of medical conditions, psychological symptoms, social support) may be seen as conceptually similar to elements of successful aging (i.e., physical, emotional, and social functioning), contemporary models of successful aging have emphasized optimal functioning and adaptation in spite of medical and psychiatric morbidities.^{5-7,9,10} Thus, although some older persons may have physical difficulties, elevated psychological symptoms, and/or low social support, they may still be able to maintain a high level of physical, emotional, and social functioning in the face of these difficulties and age successfully.

Emerging research has recognized the importance of potentially modifiable protective psychosocial variables, such as resilience, optimism, and religiosity, which may help older persons adapt to negative life events such as medical and psychiatric illness and promote successful aging.^{5-7,9,11,19,23-25} A small number of studies have also identified possible veteran-specific correlates of successful aging, although data are lacking on whether the prevalence and correlates of successful aging may differ from civilian samples. Given that most veterans in population-based samples are noncombat veterans, it is reasonable to suspect that the prevalence and correlates of successful aging should be similar to that observed in civilian samples. However, certain factors associated with military experience, such as combat exposure and positive military-related changes (i.e., enhanced coping skills), may be linked to successful aging. For example, a study of World War II and Korean War veterans found that combat exposure had positive developmental effects, such as

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