

## Psychosocial Perspective on Gerascophobia and Gerontophobia

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### ABSTRACT

*The word Gerascophobia is derived from Greek phrase tha geraso which means 'I am getting old' and phobos meaning dread or deep fear.... Gerascophobia has not been listed in Merriam Webster Medical Dictionary (1828) and Oxford English Dictionary, but it has been used by many writers..... Aging is a natural and inevitable process still, the idea of growing old may be a cause of excessive concern in some people to an extend that it may interfere with the functioning of daily life activities. Gerascophobia is closely related to Gerontophobia viz. derieved from a Latin word geron meaning 'old man' and Greek word phobos meaning dread or deep fear. Gerontophobia is also called as Gerophobia viz. fear of older people, possibly contributed by previous interaction with the elderly who may already have dementia and display childish or even violent behavior.*

### KEYWORDS

Gerascophobia, Gerontophobia, dementia

### INTRODUCTION

Growing old is commonly perceived negatively, with older age often mistakenly associated with dependence, diseases, and physical and mental deterioration. Many of these concepts are associated with old age because of the Western notion of associating beauty with youth. It is completely normal for one's appearance to change as they age, yet the prospect of these changes can cause a lot of fear and anxiety, sometimes becoming an irrational fear; this is known as gerascophobia, or the fear of getting old. The word Gerascophobia is derived from Greek phrase *thageraso* which means 'I am getting old' and *phobos* meaning dread or deep fear. Gerascophobia has not been listed in Merriam Webster Medical Dictionary (1828) and Oxford English Dictionary, but it has been used by many writers..... Aging is a natural and inevitable process still, the idea of growing old may be a cause of excessive concern in some people to an extend that it may interfere with the functioning of daily life activities. Gerascophobia is closely related to Gerontophobia viz. derived from a Latin word *geron* meaning 'old man' and Greek word *phobos* meaning dread or deep fear. Gerontophobia is also called as Gerophobia viz. fear of older people, possibly contributed by previous interaction with the elderly who may already have dementia and display childish or even violent behavior. Sufferers may be young and healthy. It could also be contributed by how differently or irrationally an individual perceives behaviour of an elderly. Such perception against older adults may reduce effective care delivery and long-term health outcomes for the elderly.

Gerascophobia, a clinical phobia generally classified under specific phobias, is characterised by an abnormal or persistence fear of growing old and may be based on anxieties of being left alone, without resources, losing self – control for dressing and feeding oneself, and incapable of caring for oneself Trevor Johnson (2009). All people have a chronological age, but it is necessary to emphasize that the number of years does not define the state of their health or mind. Being an older adult should not be related to the collapse of mental capacities or that people are unable to carry out their lives independently. Contrary to what is believed, aging is not the same for all. The aging process is different for everyone, so a unilateral model for aging does not exist. But to age healthily, it is important to take care of your health throughout your years through small actions, such as:

- Eating adequate food, following a diet rich in vegetables and fruits.
- Practicing moderate but disciplined physical exercise.
- Going to regular medical check-ups.
- Taking precautionary measures during youth and acquiring some savings that ensure economic security for later in life, and
- Accept aging as a normal fact of life.

In a study by Lizzie Parry (2015), a case of 14-year old boy who suffers from gerascophobia – an intense fear of aging is discussed. Various symptoms like loss of appetite, increased tone of speech while conversing, withdrawn from society; along with behavioural manifestations like stooped posture to appear short, anxiety were observed in him with a two years duration of symptoms. He was successfully treated with antidepressants, psychotherapy, and family therapy to resume his pre-morbid state.

### Clinical Features of Gerascophobia

While symptoms vary from person to person, the most common symptoms of gerascophobia are listed below:

- Feeling separated from reality
- Anxiety attacks and feeling breathless
- Sweating, dry mouth, shaking
- An inability to think clearly
- The constant fear of dying

### Aetiology

There are underlying causes or factors linked to the psychological issues people experience. Typically, gerascophobic individuals are prone to anxiety, and many also have underlying health concerns, such as thyroid related problems, adrenal insufficiencies, and hormonal imbalances.

Alongside this, there may be societal factors that contribute to people believing growing old is a bad thing. For example, getting older for some people may mean living

alone, losing their independence, or losing loved ones. These potentially drastic and tragic changes to their lifestyle may trigger irrational fears to develop in people who are already sensitive to the idea of death.

Additionally, gerascophobic individuals may develop a fear of old age through having first-hand negative experiences of ageing or death. Witnessing their parents or people close to them suffering as a result of ageing may contribute to the fear of being subjected to similar conditions later in life.

### Epidemiology

Bunzel (1972) claimed that Gerontophobia “engulfs one-fifth of the population of the United States.” However, he presented no evidence for this claim. Gerontophobia, in the sense of a neurosis, is only an extreme form of ageism and is actually rare in the society. However, Gerontophobia, can be found in retirement communities: when some residents become quite frail and need services, other residents may resent living among people with disabilities, fearing the consequences of their own aging (Palmore, 1972).

### Clinical Features

Symptoms of Gerontophobia are commonly seen throughout many specific phobias. According to ICD – 10 CDDG, individuals with specific (isolated) phobias exhibit either marked fear of a specific object or situation; or marked avoidance of such objects or situations. Symptoms of anxiety in feared situation at some time since the onset of the disorder may include Autonomic arousal symptoms (1) Palpitations or pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate. (2) Sweating. (3) Trembling or shaking. (4) Dry mouth (not due to medication or dehydration). Symptoms concerning chest and abdomen (5) Difficulty breathing. (6) Feeling of choking. (7) Chest pain or discomfort. (8) Nausea or abdominal distress (e.g. churning in stomach). Symptoms concerning brain and mind (9) Feeling dizzy, unsteady, faint or light-headed. (10) Feelings that objects are unreal (de-realization), or that one's self is distant or "not really here" (depersonalization). (11) Fear of losing control, going crazy, or passing out. (12) Fear of dying. General symptoms (13) Hot flushes or cold chills. (14) Numbness or tingling sensations. C. Significant emotional distress due to the avoidance or the anxiety symptoms, and a recognition that these are excessive or unreasonable. D. Symptoms are restricted to or predominate in the feared situations or when thinking about them. E. Most commonly used exclusion criteria: criterion A is not due to delusions, hallucinations, or other symptoms of disorders such as organic mental disorders (F0), schizophrenia and related disorders (F20-F29), affective disorders (F30-F39), or obsessive compulsive disorder (F42), and are not secondary to cultural beliefs.

When faced with their fear, sufferers will usually feel symptoms similar to panic attacks. These may include excessive sweating, a drop in blood pressure, shortness in breath, general anxiety and the inability to think clearly or speak normally. A fear of the elderly is usually unfounded and may cause more severe problems to occur later in life. This may include seclusion from the rest of the society, in an effort to avoid the elderly, which may lead to more serious side effects like depression. Other symptoms of gerascophobia include

breathlessness, sweating, anxiety and panic attacks when thinking about growing old; obsessive fear about losing one's appearance and independence with time; self-withdrawal and isolation from others; withdraw themselves from everyday life and isolate themselves completely; inability to think clearly; and fear of dying. This fear can lead to several consequences including interference with social and personal life, losing job opportunities and almost every daily aspect. In general, the functioning can be challenged in various domains of life.

### Aetiology

The cause of Gerontophobia is usually tied in some way to a fear of death, which can be symbolized by growing old. The cause of this fear is usually discrimination experienced. Young people often do not understand people older than them. They believe that there is nothing in common and isolating themselves from old people turn into fear and hatred of the elderly. Becoming older also brings one closer to fears associated with one's own mortality especially when they witness the demise of their peers, relatives, friends' spouses, etc. Another case of gerontophobia can be a traumatic experience with the elderly. Discriminatory aspects of ageism have been strongly linked to gerontophobia. This unreasonable fear or hatred of the elderly is associated with the fact that someday all young people will grow old and that old age is associated with death and sufferings. This unwillingness to accept death manifests in feelings of hostility and discriminatory acts towards the elderly. The Kubler Ross stages of impending doom can be understood with respect to this unwillingness to accept death.

Johnson(2009) states two reasons for the fear of getting old. A form of anticipatory anxiety of being/left alone is amongst the two main causes. Most people observe these days, that the elderly are being sent to the old age homes. Ruminating about such a hypothetical condition makes them feel even more depressed.

The next cause leading to this fear is the lack of resources. The thought of not being able to buy what they want and not able to support their basic necessities may also lead to this phobia. In addition, getting weak because of getting old leads to this fear as this develops a feeling of dependency among the elderly. Humans, being people of pride, will resent the thought that they would be burden on others. Gerascophobia can also be attributed to firsthand or secondhand negative experiences related to aging. The sufferer might have seen the difficulties faced during the old age, possibly, his parent might have experienced debilitating conditions like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, AMD or other age related degenerations.

### Treatment Approaches

There are several different types of treatment options available to those who are motivated in overcoming their fear of the elderly. These methods have had proven success in handling these phobias and can be done through self help options or by seeking out a professional. During treatment, coping strategies are commonly introduced to help better deal with stressful situations. The phobic's loved ones should also support the individual as much as

possible. Self help techniques like yoga, meditation, positive visualization along with modern medications can also help overcome the fear to a great extent.

**Here are a few most popular options -**

- **Breathing Techniques:** If your fear is only moderate or partially containable, learning a soothing breathing exercise may be just what you need to handle stressful situations.
- **Systematic Desensitization :** A three part process which includes relaxation, understanding exactly what you fear and finally becoming more familiar with each of your fears on a personal level.
- **Flooding:** A person is directly immersed in their fear until the fear subsides and the patient realizes that there was nothing to fear in the first place.
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) :** It is a psychological technique which is very helpful in treating Gerontophobia. People here learn to change their thoughts to change their resulting feelings. The person, for example, learns to focus more on the positive aspects of becoming older than the negative aspects. CBT is the most common form of treatment.

It is completely possible to get over Gerascophobia using a combination of self help techniques and medical intervention. However, the cure for this phobia mainly depends on how the phobic accepts aging as a natural part of life.

Few of the recommended therapies for overcoming the fear of getting old include:

**Exposure therapy**– This is closely related to CBT or cognitive behaviour therapy. It includes 5 steps-Evaluation, Feedback, Developing fear hierarchy, Exposure and Building upon the rationalization steps. CBT or Exposure therapists help the patient rethink his thoughts and responses about getting old in order to control them better. Exposure may also include, in varying degrees, stimuli that involve seeing pictures or videos about old age and then using the flooding technique to overcome the Gerascophobia once and for all.

**Energy Psychology or the Emotional Freedom Technique**- This is a form of acupuncture therapy without needles. It helps get to the bottom of the phobia by removing negative association with getting old.

**Hypnotherapy** is yet another technique for overcoming Gerascophobia once and for all.

## CONCLUSION

Gerascophobia and Gerontophobia are nonetheless similar fears which somewhere down the line affect the mental abilities of the individuals for a longer span of time till the time they



receive proper treatment. By bridging the gap between fear and understanding, therapy empowers clients to not only face their gerascophobia but also to embrace the complexities of life with greater confidence and peace.

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