

**Happily Old! A Qualitative Inquiry into Sources of Happiness Among  
Older Adults of Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

Old age is characterized by a decline in physical ability, less social life, and a lowering of cognitive functioning, but older adults have distinct ways to enjoy life. This study aimed to explore and understand the sources of happiness among the older adults of Nepal in a phenomenological qualitative design. A convenient sample of 39 was made with the help of research assistants. The data collected by interviews were transcribed, coded, and categorized in the framework of thematic analysis. The interpretation of data was summarized in four themes: physical agility, social harmony, correct thought, and retirement management. The understanding of the causes of happiness for older adults can be useful for the design of interventions to enhance the quality of life among them. The limitations and future studies have also been discussed.

*Keywords:* Old age, senior citizens, older adults, *ashram*, prachya philosophy, happiness

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Developmental psychologists study old age as late adulthood and believe it starts from a person's sixties or seventies (Santrock, 2019, p. 15). "Older adults" is the phrase used to define people of 60 or 65 years and above (R. Gautam et al., 2007; Tausig & Subedi, 2022). However, the authentic dictionary of Nepal Academy mentions 50 years as a cut-off of old age (Nepal Academy, 2076BS [2019]). Nepal Government gives "*vridhdha bhataa*" or old people's allowance from the age of 70 (Dhungana et al., 2020). This age was reduced to 68 but is about to be reverted to 70. In Nepal, "*jestha nagarik*" or "senior citizen" is an accepted vernacular to mean old persons or older adults. In Nepal, government documents use this term and it refers to persons of 60 years or above (Government of Nepal, 2021).

Biologically speaking, growing old age comes with real physical decline (Boyd & Bee, 2015, p. 440) seen in processes like shrinkage in frontal lobes (Berk, 2018, p. 605) hearing impairment, and vision problems. Cognitive declines like memory failures, slower language processing, and impaired problem-solving are apparent (Berk, 2018, p. 607). Socially, old persons interact selectively; their social network diminishes. Physical health is the predictor of late-life psychological well-being. Older adults may have to face widowhood. They may feel alone and depressed. Spouses of depressed older adults may have to suffer because of the added caregiver burden (Gurung et al., 2003). The socioemotional selectivity theory posits that elderly people lessen relationships but retain quality ones as they grow (Giddens et al., 2018). Another functionalist theory called activity theory contends that busy and engaged older adults are likelier to lead happy lives. Continuity theory says that if older adults do activities that match their personality and preferences, they can be healthier (p.300).

In Nepal, 33 to 44 percent older adults showed depressive symptoms (Adhikari, 2023; Adhikari & McLaren, 2021). Six percent of rural older adults were functionally impaired (Adhikari & McLaren, 2021). Most of the persons in Nepal enter old age after deprivation such as inadequate quality and quantity of food (Geriatric Center Nepal, 2010). In city, almost all older adults belonged to middle-class families, more than half of older adults were literate, three-fourths of older adults got old age allowance, and nearly three-fourths of older adults had a social connection of some sort (Adhikari, 2023).

### **Old Age in *Prachya* Philosophy**

Life should proceed in four *ashrama* (or stages): *brahmacharya* (student), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (forest-dweller), and *sanyas* (renouncer) and aim for four *purushartha* (purposes): *dharma* (appropriate conduct), *artha* (material well-being), *kama* (physical satisfaction) and *moksha* (liberation) according to *Prachya Darshan* (also called Indian philosophy). Somebody can be a true renouncer in old age if they lived a rich life in their younger days (Chakravarthi, 1995). *Vanaprastha* and *sanyasa* are related to old age (Dwivedi, 2018). Literary works like *Vairagya Shatakam* or 100 Verses of Detachment (Bhartrihari, n.d./2018) portray old age as fearsome as a tigress (*vyaghriva tishtati jara*) rather than an obvious and inevitable phase of life. It mentions that old age comes with symptoms like feeble limbs, unsteady walking, drooling, falling of teeth, and poor eyesight. The relatives disregard the old person's ideas. The spouse cannot help and the children get hostile (verse 73). Tausig and Subedi (2022) suggest considering social factors while considering the health, and well-being of older adults in Nepal. So, biological and psychological considerations would not be enough.

## **Problems of Old People in Nepal**

The trend of young children's migration for employment has left old couples alone in villages or cities of Nepal. They are suffering from psychological distress. Almost half of older adults were found to have depression in rural mid-hills (Adhikari & McLaren, 2023). In city, one in every three older adults were depressed (Adhikari, 2024). Older adults are lonely and have to bear the cultural and social burdens (T. R. Gautam, 2008). The urban old people have similar problems. Almost half of older people have been abused (Chalise & Basnet, 2017) emotionally, economically, physically, or otherwise. Neglect, disrespect, and verbal slurs are the most common forms of abuse. Almost three-fourths of older people have problems with sleep (Dangol et al., 2020). Half of urban older people have depression (Simkhada et al., 2018) and frailty (Devkota et al., 2017). Lower literacy, smoking, the prevalence of diseases, and exclusion during family decision-making are at the roots of the problems. Family conflict and economic hardship (Adhikari et al., 2017) are some causes of psychosocial and mental problems in older adults in Nepal. The old age homes in Nepal are growing in demand. Existing ones have basic facilities. Still, abandoned old persons find relief in those homes (Speck & Muller-Boker, 2021).

## **Sources of Happiness in Older Adults**

Happiness in old age is related to challenges of old age, strategies to lead meaningful life, and available resources (see Jitdorn et al., 2021 for review). Independence, freedom, and ability to do daily activities are needed for happiness. Setting life goals, doing daily/religious activities, and engaging in enjoyable activities are also necessary. Older adults who get support are happier. Pandemic showed that sources of happiness for older adults were family and social relationships, social contact through digital media, and hobbies (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021). Physical activities, and time in nature were also helpful to increase psychosocial well-being.

## **Psychosocial Strengths Among Older Adults in Nepal**

Culturally, old age is a respected stage of life in Nepal (Chalise, 2021). There are some rites like Chaurasi Pooja specially dedicated for older adults (Adhikari, 2023). Older adults especially widowed women can resile if they have higher education and financial independence (Pant, 2022). Two-third older adults are found satisfied in life (Subedi, 2022). Active learners, rich and married people, and those with high nutritional scores are more satisfied in life (Ghimire et al., 2018). The quality of life is better in the earlier part of old age than in the later part (Samadarshi et al., 2021; Subedi, 2022). It is better for those with higher income, low depression, and those who receive social support and can afford health services (Samadarshi et al., 2021). Happiness varies based on the gender, caste, and geography of older adults. Hope and agency can even weaken the relationship between the feeling of being burdened and suicidal thoughts, and pathways can weaken the relationship between the feeling of belonging with none and thoughts of suicide (McLaren & Adhikari, 2023). Social capital like social support and culture can be additional resources for older adults (Adhikari, 2023; Adhikari & McLaren, 2023).

Culture and values in Nepalese society are friendly to older adults. Older adults have the strengths such as life experiences, wisdom, emotional intelligence, positive outlook, social support, resilience, being satisfied with what they already have, and spirituality/faith in higher power.

### **Relevant Theories**

*Vanaprashtha* and *Sanyas* ashrams are the last two stages of old life. The developmental tasks of *vanaprastha* are to pass on duties to progenies, shift to the forest, read books, have peace of mind, and abandon indulgence and those of *sanyas* are to meditate, give up desires and attain

‘moksha’ or make supreme God one’s pal (Dwivedi, 2018). These two concepts have been taken as a framework of this study and findings have been weighed on the reference of these developmental milestones.

### **Significance of the Study**

Need to find ways to enhance well-being among older adults has been suggested (Jitdorn et al., 2021). In Nepal, the study of problems of older adults has gained good attention but strength-based inquiries are very few. Some existing inquiries are about resilience, quality of life, and life satisfaction. This study aimed to find the sources of happiness, a positive emotion among older adults in Nepal by qualitative exploration. It also aimed to understand if the older adults in Nepal today achieve the developmental milestones imagined by the last two *ashrams* in prachya philosophy. This inquiry is expected to contribute to the theory and practice of positive psychology and social psychology of older adults that the quantitative studies have not addressed yet.

### **Objectives and Research Questions**

This study aimed to explore the experiences of happiness in older adults and understand the things, moments, or activities that make older adults happy, glad, or joyous. It also weighed the developmental tasks of older adults against those guided by the last two *ashrams* in prachya philosophy. The related research questions are given below:

- What are the things, moments, and activities that make older adults happy?
- What are the sources of older adults’ happiness?

### **Method**

A convenient sample of 39 older adults was made with the help of research assistants. Data was collected by interview method. Some participants were interviewed more than once. The participants hailed from various parts of the country: four from Bara, one from Hetauda, one from Terhathum, three from Panauti, ten from Kathmandu, three from Biratnagar, three from Tanahu, nine from Bhaktapur, and the remaining five from Pokhara. There were 22 males and 17 females. The participants were asked open-ended questions like “Can you recall the moments when you were very happy?” or “How can an older adult be happy?” Research assistants also did the transcription. After the interviews were transcribed, they were coded. The codes were categorized and developed into themes. Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis approach. It has been informed by the philosophical framework of phenomenology because thematic analysis cannot occur in a vacuum or be atheoretical (Clarke & Braun, 2018). On every positive side, there is a negative one. The research was about sources of happiness; the participants broached sad aspects of life when they talked about happiness. Hence, the analysis of interviews has generated several ideas about miseries or problems also (refer to Table 1). As part of the reflexivity that is necessary for qualitative research (Adhikari, 2021), I need to state that I am the son of two parents in old age and several other relatives in the same phase of life. I know their stories and have witnessed their times of joy and misery. The interpretation has been affected by my experiences with older adults. In the process of research, I have got the wise words of older adults to get prepared for old age timely. I have a clearer understanding (*verstehen*) about this phase of life and my attitude has broadened.



## Findings

**Table 1**

*Codes Derived from the Interview Transcripts*

Sources of happiness	Sources of misery
Good health; ability to do activities of daily living	Bad health; weak body; functional impairment; frailty; waning self-efficacy
Settled children; occasional gifts from them; regular interaction with them	Unemployed children; poverty; children's emigration
Family support; care; occasional visit to relatives/temple; celebration of festivals with family and relatives	Worry about children; neglect; disobedience; family conflict; physical abuse
Old age allowance; health insurance; governmental regulation (of vegetables for chemicals)	Indifferent government (during disasters); legal apathy; air pollution; traffic congestion
Basic needs fulfilled	Lack of good house; loss of financial control
Pet; somebody to talk/chit chat; minor agricultural tasks on farm to do	Loneliness; children spending time on social media rather than with old persons
Self-reliance; engagement in suitable occupation	Dependence; burdensomeness
Good past recollection	Bad memories
Respect/Acceptance/approval from others; praise	Disrespect; discrimination; slight; family's un-cooperation; exclusion from family affairs; wealth-minded sons

Sources of happiness	Sources of misery
Creative deeds; pastime activities; success in life	Boredom
Hangout; religious activities; faith; physical exercise (walking, yoga)	Political affairs in the country
Small dreams; helping others	Unfulfilled dreams (like education)
Flexibility; accept changes in life	Rigidity; want to dominate family affairs
Anger management; calmness; social harmony	Anger
Understanding partner	Spouses' conflicting values; children's ruined life (like by alcoholism)
Polite interaction from the family	Bland meal
Acceptance of old age problems	Being the odd one out; disregarding of old person's intellect
Handing responsibilities to family members	Fear of bad perception of frailty
Positive thinking	Relatives sowing conflict in family

The following themes have been generated after analyzing the data. The codes given in Table 1 have been categorized even though the categorization was an arduous task.

**Physical Agility**

Being healthy is an important thing in old age to be happy. Many older adults reported having problems with body parts aching and getting ill. Some had chronic conditions like arthritis and gastritis. Abilities to do activities of daily living are valuable because every old person may not be able to do those. Bad health, weak body, functional impairment, and frailty all decreased the degree of joy in life.

*I walk and roam around, visit friends, and chat with them. I go to Bihar and attend bhajan kirtan. I am illiterate and innocent. I spend days likewise. I feel I am still young but others remind me that I have grown old. I am happy because I do not have a disease or loans. Above all, I am free from disease. I walk a lot and my body gets tired. So, I sleep well too [p32, male, Kathmandu].*

*Maybe people above 80 can be called old. People are fitter now. In my parents' generation, people got older earlier. I have friends of 40, 45. I walk with them daily and do not feel old. However, my ability to work has declined [p31, male, Kathmandu]*

*Can't stand from the place I sit. I feel embarrassed about what others will think [p21, female, Biratnagar]*

*I am mostly fit. I have a cow to look after. I do kitchen work when my youngest son is absent. Otherwise, he does it. Then I go to cut grass. Then I manage cow dung. Looking after the cow helps me spend my time. My husband also goes out to work during the day. How lonely would it be if there was no cow! There is hard work but I am happy. Lately, continuous pinching pain has started in my knee and I have begun to think I may no longer be able to rear a cow in the near future [p29, female, Kavre].*

### **Social Harmony**

The need for affiliation continues in senescence also. However, old adults are less able to give. They can offer consultation and best wishes. Not just the matters of receiving, old people are happy to observe family members being settled and everybody else doing good. They are disturbed by country affairs going wrong. The older adults reported being happy when progress

and developments were witnessed in the surroundings. Development issues like pollution and congested traffic were bothersome to old adults in urban areas.

#### *Observed Social Wellness*

The old adults were happy to see that their progeny settled (as in marriage, employment, or educational achievement). They were disturbed, annoyed, and unhappy if the children were unemployed, unmarried, and deviant (as in alcoholism). Children's leaving education got on their nerves. It was soothing for them to recollect pleasant experiences from the past. Happiness surged when they could remember the past selves that were strong, cordial, and responsible but plunged when feeble past selves were visualized. The older adults were happy when they saw their children flourish.

*I got both my son and daughter married. My family provides help. They do not slight me; everything is just fine [p9, female, Tanahun]*

*I am glad to see my children settled. Everybody treats me well. Son's life is good. He also married. His wife left her home for us and is living here as a daughter. We have built our house. My daughter is settled in the US; she has her children there [p34, male, Bhaktapur].*

#### **Received Social Benefit**

Old adults deserve respect and they are happy to get it. They are happy to be honored. They do not want to be lonely and depressed. The old people need somebody to talk to. They want relatives to visit occasionally. Some older adults suggested that they needed to get creative with things around them to increase happiness. They wanted their children to take them for visits to relatives sometimes and houses of worship (like temples) sometimes. Some older adults reported that *bhajan kirtan* (singing God's praise) and *jap* (repeatedly

verbalizing God's names mentally) had become their favorite pastimes. If there was nobody to talk to, no work to do, and no activity to be involved in, a day stretched to a week.

Receiving praise and approval from others is not unwelcome. They boost morale. The government's giving of an old age allowance is a good thing but it benefits older adults of 70 and above. Older adults in this study expected sweet interaction from the family on a regular basis. They did not expect but got surprised by the occasional gifts from children.

*My family is good. They take care. Daughters have given shelter. Son is rotten. He drinks. We had tried to provide education but he did not study. All other desires have been fulfilled. I am happy [p7, female, Tanahun]*

*I feel emptiness because of illness. My body aches, limbs feel like breaking. I consume medicines daily. That is what I dislike. My daughter-in-law massaged me; I was relieved and could sleep that night [p9, female, Bara]*

*We are good and fit today. Everybody is doing good. Our needs are also met. I hope the family will take care when we grow even older and maybe weaker [p35, female, Bhaktapur].*

### **Correct Thought**

Old age is the age of renunciation. If old persons deny or resist the frailty that is obvious to happen sooner or later, they may be unhappy. Accepting the changes in the body, in the family, and in society is a key to joy in life. Trying to have dominance in the family was not suggested by the participants of this study. They suggested having high self-esteem, accepting the changes easily, and remembering God rather than worrying unnecessarily. Older persons should be able to control their anger. If the basic needs were met, they should console themselves, the participants suggested.

*During old age, positive thinking should be a habit. If bad thoughts come, we should distract [p8, male, Bara].*

*Life can be more relaxing in old age. There is the son and his wife. They treat well or at least I think they treat well. We should be satisfied whatsoever [p20, male, Biratnagar].*

### **Retirement Management**

Correct thought should be executed by proper management like creating an environment to get basic needs fulfilled and arranging pastime activities like yoga or religious involvement (like *bhajan kirtan*). They should have suitable pets like dogs or cows. Above all, the family responsibilities should be handed over to the successors. Still, for the security of older adults, the property should be retained with them till the end of life.

*I would feel lonely all day if I did not have this dog. There is none to talk to. I play with this dog. I feed and bathe it. It is my closest companion since my body became nearly crippled and I could not go out [p28, female, Kavre]*

*I meditate on God and my problems are forgotten. Doctors cannot heal me. I want to be guided by God's sermon. Truth be on my mind, om shanti (pray for peace)! (p11, male, Bara).*

*I feel lonely and wish there were a park so that older adults could gather. I am in the city; my heart goes back to the village. There would be open space to roam if I lived in the village (p13, female, Bhaktapur).*

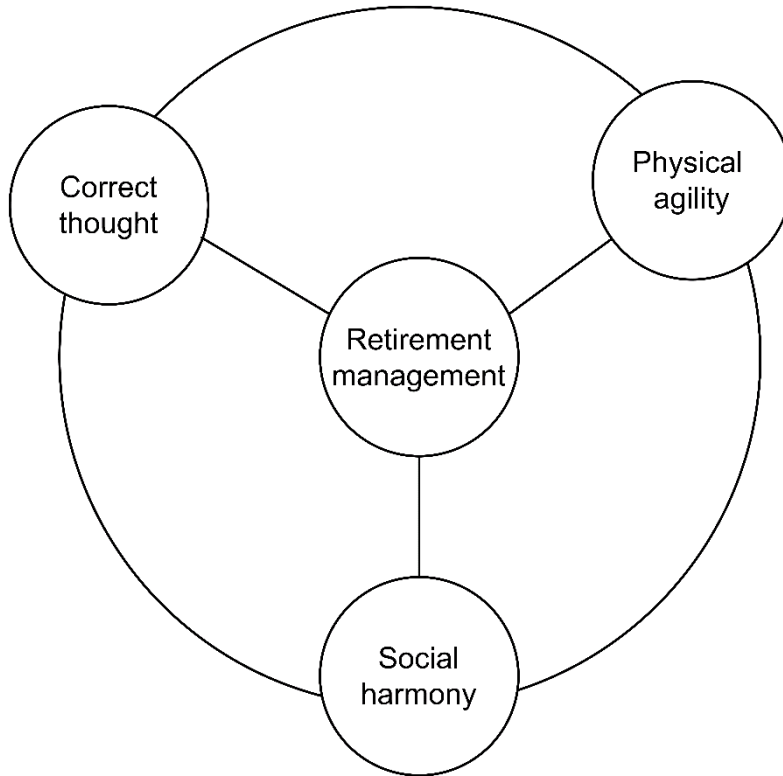
*There is a relative of mine who wants to stick to her ways even when she is old and her children are ready to take the helm. She would be way happier if she renounced. Look at me, I am*

*deserting everything gradually. Her mistake was to pass on all the property too soon and hence the family started to slight (p27, male, Kavre).*

*I have kept myself active in science, literature, social work, and vipassana. These activities keep me happy and alive. I have crossed 60 but am still as energetic [p33, male, Kathmandu].*

**Figure 1**

*Sources of happiness in old age: Four themes of this study*



## Discussion

The findings are summarized in Figure 1. Some findings are in support of the activity theory. The older adults' want of pets to cater to and play with indicates their need for involvement. They also reported the need for some tasks that they are capable of doing. This sentiment resonated with the saying "*sakunjel garnuparchha; kaam nagare pani jiu kunjo hola*" or "We need to do some tasks that we can do, lest the body parts jam". So, remaining busy not only leads to a fulfilling life but also is helpful for physical agility. The activity theory may be refined in the newer dimension of physical fitness also. Activity theory suggests maintaining activities and finding status and roles as things change (Conerly et al., 2021, p. 397).

The findings indicate some extent of Nepalese older adults' compliance with *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*. They reported passing on family and civil responsibilities to successors. Obviously, living in forests would not be feasible but leaving desires and meditating on God would be. In this study, some older adults were satisfied with what they had but other older adults clung to desires like that of a better house, settlement of their grown-up children, and more old age allowance. In a true sense, the older adults had not renounced even though most of them were aware that they had to. The practical implication is that older adults can be trained for a better and more fulfilling old age. Some organizations including the government can bear the responsibility and design interventions that facilitate teaching skills for physical agility, correct thought, social harmony, and retirement management. Some uncontrollable aspects like observed social wellness cannot be managed by older adults but they can do cognitive restructuring to be satisfied with what they have, accept changes around and meditate on objects of faith (like God).

This study found that older people perceived to have been both physically and mentally weak as they aged but Thapa (2018) found them to be mentally agile. However, his findings like



experiences of neglect, discrimination, loneliness, insecurity, and involvement in spiritual practices and thoughts are verified in this study also. They seek respect and expect family care, also as he pointed out. An older adult said an adage *budho bhayo saba ranga gayo, aagan bhayo pardesh* (With the coming of old age, the colorfulness has gone away; own courtyard has been converted to a foreign land, hey!) as reported in Sharma (2019). Old age allowance is perceived as guardianship of the government. It provides economic freedom (Sendhai, 2021) and older adults are satisfied with this social security. A Chinese study (Chyi & Mao, 2012) showed that older adults living with grandchildren were far happier than those without grandchildren. In Nepal, children's settlement not only means economic stability but also it means happy marriage and procreation. This study is in agreement with Adhikari and McLaren's (2023) and Adhikari's (2023) conclusion that social support is useful for alleviating mental distress, or conversely, increasing happiness.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study was limited by a psychological perspective. The sociological perspective can unveil more sources of happiness and the roles of social institutions in facilitating the well-being and joy of older adults in the last phase of their lives. Some participants in this study have called out the government to solve their miseries. Future studies can be done with a sociological perspective. Observed social wellness depends on some psychological factors but most on sociological and economic factors like employment. Inductive probing, which is lacking in this study, would have generated finer details about how older people got happier.

Ethnomethodology would be a more suitable framework to study the process of older adults' happiness. Future studies can take its care. This study took all older adults as participants. Future

inquiries can cross-sectionally study older adults from different socio-demographic segments. For example, participants can be compared based on age groups (below 75 vs. above 75).

### **Conclusion**

The indication of a well-functioning society is seen on the faces of older adults. If they are brilliant and smiling, society is doing well and going on rightly but the gloomy old age indicates that society is degrading. So, cheerful older adults are what we want to have in our society. This study showed some sources of happiness for them. They are physical fitness, the right way of cognition, social wellness, and retirement management techniques. Older adults enjoy interaction with children and others, *bhajan kirtan* and other religious activities, playing with, and taking care of pets. They are happy to know about children's progress and society's development. Older adults are glad when government takes care of them as in allowance or health insurance, or when children bring gifts surprisingly. The older adults are aware that they should forsake desires but have not been able to do the renunciation completely. They are too attached to the family's future and too worried about their future status sometimes. They are very insecure and have not surrendered to God as the last two ashrams of prachya philosophy would require them to. Happiness comes from the familial and social support received by older adults. The observed familial and social harmony also gives joy to older adults.

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