



Research Article

Resilient Coping with Vulnerable Later Life Transitions

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Abstract

Later life transitions are often accompanied by losses that result in grief, cultural bereavement, loneliness, and social isolation. Resilience, defined as a dynamic and contextually shaped capacity for positive adaptation, can serve as a key protective factor in coping with the challenges associated with later life transitions. This paper examines the ways that older adults manage later life transitions, vulnerabilities, and loss with particular attention to processes that foster resilient coping and self-transcendence. Drawing on qualitative life history interviews with 23 adults aged 70 years and older and a systematic analysis of relevant literature, the study explored the behaviors, supports, and connections that promote adaptation in later life. Thematic analysis revealed three primary areas of stress: (a) personal transitions and losses (e.g., retirement, health decline, death of loved ones), (b) personal and cultural bereavement related to personal, social, and cultural change, and (c) concerns about the future, including safety, climate anxiety, and political instability. Participants described varied coping strategies focused on emotional validation, managing bereavement, honoring grief and loss, emotional regulation, and transcendence. Engagement in personal and culturally meaningful rituals, creative practices, religious or spiritual activities, and nature-based experiences emerged as central to resilient coping. These practices fostered acceptance, meaning and purpose, identity coherence, and ego integrity. Findings underscore the importance of day-to-day experiences related to varied personal and cultural rituals in promoting adaptive aging and psychological well-being during vulnerable life periods.

Key Words: Later life transitions, resilience, cultural bereavement, loss, coping

Resilient Coping with Vulnerable Later Life Transitions

The global increase in longevity has underscored the importance of examining how individuals cope with later life transitions [1]. These transitions are often accompanied by loss, including the loss of meaningful social roles, declining health and vitality, the death of family members and friends, and the erosion of community ties and cultural competence. In the face of loss, older adults may experience cultural bereavement, loneliness, and social isolation. Cultural bereavement is experienced when an individual attempts

to cope with a range of personal and cultural transitions that have irrevocably changed their life. It could result from the loss of a loved one, loss of health, loss of community, loss of a country due to migration and immigration, loss of social trust due to political change, and loss of a way of life due to personal or social change. When, for whatever reason, we must cope with a new and transformed cultural reality, we experience a degree of cultural bereavement. It is a reaction of grief experienced when that which is familiar no longer exists [2,3].

Understanding how individuals respond to the vulnerable transitions of later life is important for developing effective interventions that

can support adaptation, enhance resilience, and promote continued engagement, meaning, and purpose in life. The struggle to manage the losses of later life can lead to physical and psychological decline, even premature mortality [4]. Research suggests that later life loss can lead to reduced immune functioning and an increased risk of chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension [5]. Moreover, unresolved or early life trauma can resurface during periods of significant stress or loss, further complicating later life adjustment and coping [6].

Resilience and Coping with Later Life Transitions

Resilience has been identified as a powerful protective factor associated with an increased capacity to cope effectively with life change, transition, and loss (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). Resilience encompasses positive adaptive behaviors and attitudes such as self-compassion, emotional management, perceived control, and the ability to draw on the wisdom gained from prior life experiences. Resilience was initially examined through the construct of “hardiness,” and understood to be a relatively stable personality characteristic consisting of a sense of control, commitment, and the tendency to appraise stressors as manageable challenges rather than threats [7, 8]. Early research framed resilience as a stable individual trait; however, more recent scholarship demonstrates that resilience is, in fact, dynamic and malleable and shaped by personal, social, and cultural contexts and resources [9].

Resilience and Self-Transcendence

In later life, resilient coping also involves the development of self-transcendence, an inner resource associated with adaptive aging and late-life ego integrity [10]. According to the theory of self-transcendence, adaptation to aging-related transitions involves a redefinition of the self that is characterized by a shift toward a more transcendent orientation that results in an increased sense of meaning, purpose, and life satisfaction [11]. Later-life transcendence reflects a spiritual and existential shift from egocentrism toward a broader awareness of one’s lifelong contributions and place in the world. Transcendence may develop as part of the natural aging process through natural, social, spiritual, or religious engagement. It can also develop in response to stress, loss, and bereavement, prompting an internal process of existential re-evaluation that involves self, identity, and understanding of vulnerability and time limitation. Self-transcendence can also promote greater acceptance of past trauma, present circumstances, and a heightened sense of self-coherence about one’s life path [12, 13]. By expanding personal awareness during times of stress, self-transcendence is a healing and adaptive coping strategy that fosters resilience, contentment, ego integrity, acceptance, and peace [10].

Late Life Coping Theories

Several theoretical approaches are useful in understanding effective resilient adaptation to late-life transitions. In later life, individuals become increasingly aware of their finitude. Such awareness leads to the need to construct a coherent and meaningful life narrative

and to cope with multiple transitions, including retirement, declining health, bereavement, and changing social roles. [14], for example, emphasized the importance of ego integrity over despair. Similarly, socioemotional selectivity theory highlights how older adults adapt to perceived time limitations by prioritizing emotionally meaningful goals and relationships. From a resilience perspective, successful adaptation in later life involves not only managing loss and change but also drawing on accumulated life experience, personal strengths, and social connections. These adaptations maintain a sense of continuity and purpose amid evolving social and cultural circumstances. [15] introduced the notion of selective optimization with compensation (SOC), which stresses the importance of tapping resources and spending time on meaningful and healing activities that promote life satisfaction. Similarly, [16] found that as people progress through adulthood, they can develop more emotionally rewarding lives by selectively disengaging from non-rewarding activities and experiences. Consequently, older adults are usually more able to optimize their positive emotional experiences and minimize their negative and emotionally unrewarding experiences.

In this paper, we examine how older adults cope with later life transitions, stressors, and losses. Drawing on qualitative interviews and a systematic analysis of the literature, we explore the behaviors, supports, and connections that promote resilient coping in the face of personal and cultural bereavement resulting from later-life vulnerable transitions and loss. We further explore the processes that reduce feelings of loneliness and social isolation and lead to an increase in acceptance, peace, meaning, purpose, and mattering.

Method

The qualitative data for this paper were gathered from life history interviews, which were conducted with 23 adults aged 70 years and older. The 16 women and 7 men ranged in age from 71 to 101. Participants were members of a nine-year Life History Project conducted between January 2016 and May 2025. The initial project involved 116 participants. The project originated as part of the World Health Organization (WHO) and AARP Livable Communities Initiative. Participants in the present study, all of whom had experienced a significant transition or loss during the period of the project, have continued their participation for the 9 years of the project. Sixteen of the 23 participants were White (8 of these immigrants), 5 Latinx (3 of these were immigrants), and 2 African American participants. Seven of the White participants were men, two of them immigrants. Immigrant participants were naturalized citizens and had lived in the United States for at least 20 years. All had been married with at least one child, two were widowed, and two divorced. They self-identified as “middle class” and had attended at least two years of higher education. Six of them had advanced degrees. Although participants had health challenges, all lived in the community and had no major mobility issues.

Semi-structured life history interviews were conducted at the beginning of the project, and narratives were developed for each participant. Narratives were refined over time; additional interviews were conducted a minimum of three times per year for the duration of the project. Each interview began with the open-ended prompt, “What has been going on in your life since we last talked?” Follow-up interview questions addressed sources of life satisfaction, concerns, stressors, and coping strategies. Examples of questions included: “There are many effective ways of coping with life’s transitions, changes, and loss. What are some ways that help you cope? What works for you? As life changes, what helps you find peace and acceptance? What are some things that matter the most to you at this time? What are you most concerned about? How satisfied are you with your life at this time? In the past you have said that _____ is one activity/resource that has helped you, is that still important to you? How do these activities, for example, spending time outdoors, creativity, and personal rituals (based on previous responses) fit into your life at this time? What are some of the benefits/outcomes connected to these? Additional questions focused on experiences that promoted self-transcendence, meaning, purpose, and mattering.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of life history narratives and interview data indicated that the main transitional challenges or areas of stress were 1) personal transitions and losses (including retirement, health concerns, and death of loved ones; 2) personal and cultural bereavement (concerns about adaptation to cultural change, cultural competence, social and political change), and 3) stress and concern about the future, personal future as well as the future of the country and the planet, including safety, fear of violence, climate anxiety, and political instability.

Qualitative thematic data analysis [17] of participants’ responses indicated that coping strategies were diverse and multifaceted. Resilient coping and healing were enhanced through several interconnected processes, including the validation of emotions; the expression of pain and grief; emotional regulation; and experiences of transcendence. Participants described a range of activities that supported resilience. Engagement in personal and cultural rituals, including creative practices and nature-based activities were mentioned as the primary coping and resilience-enhancing practices. Participants stated that engagement in these promoted feelings of acceptance, affirmation, peace, safety, and self-transcendence. Developing personally meaningful rituals was satisfying and healing, as was the nurturance of creative interests. The desire and need to participate in culturally defined rituals, such as holiday rituals, religious participation, celebration ceremonies, and community engagement, promoted a sense of embeddedness within family, community, and culture, and enhanced feelings of spirituality and religiousness, both of which contributed to meaning-making and psychological well-being [18].

Healing Rituals

In this study, all 23 participants mentioned the importance of at least one personal and cultural ritual that served a healing role for them. Benefits were multifaceted and fostered an increased sense of belonging to a place, a measure of peace, and an increase in a sense of control. Rituals have a long association with life transitions. In the context of this study, participants discussed how various rituals, often involving creativity or natural connections, aided in more resilient coping. The most frequently discussed rituals included prayer, nature walking, meditation, painting, writing, playing music, singing, and daily tea, coffee, and wine rituals.

Taking part in culturally established rituals, traditions, and roles provided support, connection, and socialization. These included religious participation, prayer, meditation, holiday rituals, rites of passage celebrations, and other cultural practices. Consistent with recent findings on the healing power of rituals, in this study, participants reported that rituals helped them reflect on their place in the world, promoted meaning and purpose, and increased transcendence [19]. Examples of comments include:

“When I was younger, I did not like taking time to light candles every week; now I love lighting the Shabbat candles on Friday evening. I find the ritual soothing and comforting. It connects me with the past.” 80-year-old Susie

“Drinking tea in small glasses with sugar cubes reminds me of my family and afternoons on the rooftop. I look forward to it every day. Reminds me of the comfort of the afternoons of my childhood. It is now one of my afternoon habits when I am home.” 78-year-old Fati

Rituals also enhanced a sense of mattering, meaning, and purpose. Holidays, monthly gatherings, Sunday services, movie night, teatime, and established cultural ceremonies were related to the healing process.

“I have an online group that I meet, and we have a morning prayer ritual that sets the tone for my day. It is about more than faith; it is about connection and comfort. When my husband died, this practice helped get me through the day.” 85-year-old Louise

Rituals and Creativity

Analysis of responses indicated that effective coping often involved creative rituals. Creativity is associated with engagement with life, originality, experimentation, and problem-solving. Although creativity has generally been linked to artistic practices, creative activities can involve artistic engagement, natural engagement, physical activity and movement, music, crafts, spiritual, and mindfulness activities. According to related research, nurturing creative impulses is not only healing in the moment, but it also has the potential to lead to physical and emotional change and self-transcendence [20, 21].

Nurturing creative impulses has long been connected to higher levels of life satisfaction and overall psychological well-being. Humanistic psychologists, such as [22], emphasized meaning, self-actualization, and individuation as concepts central to creative expression. Similarly, [23] concept of flow describes a psychological state of optimal engagement in which individuals are fully immersed in an activity [24].

According to participants, creative rituals were mentioned as one of the most powerful ways of coping with loss. Studies have reinforced this finding and have supported a link between creativity and more resilient coping [25, 26]. Creativity is also linked to experiences of transcendence, connection, and engagement. Writing, painting, gardening, photography, meditation, walking, and even routine daily tasks can be absorbing and foster positive emotional engagement and aid in managing painful emotions associated with bereavement. Comments from participants relating to creative rituals include:

“Painting has saved my life. I can sit at my table and spend the afternoon painting how I feel and who I feel I am at this time in life. It helps me forget about my sadness.” 72-year-old Nathan

“I have always appreciated music and enjoyed playing. I no longer play, but listening to the music of my country and my youth brings back good memories and makes me feel better; it soothes me.” 84-year-old Beverly

Creative rituals also centered on participants’ reflections about the struggle for voice and self-expression. Creativity fostered self-expression through a variety of activities, including art, music, writing, gardening, and cooking. These activities also facilitated conversation and social connection, providing healing in the moment while simultaneously serving as a bridge to posterity by linking lives across generations. Through these processes, creative rituals promote self-transcendence, enhance positive emotions, and strengthen resilience. As 90-year-old Rita said:

“I often feel like no one wants to listen to me. When I take a particularly nice photograph, though, I can show it to my family, and we talk about where I took it and what I was doing while I saw the view. I feel like I am listening to more through my photography than when I just want to talk. It is not ideal, but it is something.”

Additionally, creative rituals increased empathy for shared human experiences such as aging, loss, and death, and for some participants, experiences related to immigration, migration, trauma, and war. Twenty-two of the participants stated that they engaged in creative rituals, which functioned as vital tools for coping, supporting emotional regulation, and fostering resilience. Creative rituals relate to Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which suggests that engaging in positive emotional outlets reduces fear and anxiety. By fostering positive emotions, creative activities can be a useful coping and healing tool [27].

Spiritual and Creative Meaning-Making

Although spiritual guidance was not examined as a separate focus of this study, many of the coping practices described, such as prayer, meditation, reflection, and participation in spiritually meaningful rituals, can be understood as ways of finding meaning in later life. From an interpretive perspective, these practices may help older adults make sense of loss, aging, and mortality, and support feelings of peace, acceptance, and purpose during periods of transition.

Creative activities support healing in later life by allowing emotional expression and helping individuals manage distress associated with loss and change. Engaging in creativity can provide structure, routine, and a sense of purpose, while also promoting positive emotions and self-worth. In this way, creative engagement can function as a healing process that strengthens resilient coping during later life transitions.

Natural Connections and Resilient Coping

Emerging research has explored how connecting with nature and spending time outdoors is helpful in coping with later-life transitions by providing healing and therapeutic benefits. During stressful periods, time in green and blue spaces can also aid in combating loneliness and isolation, which, in turn, fosters self-transcendence that leads to renewed meaning and purpose [28]. Consistent with this research, participants in this study found that natural connections prompted more resilient coping. Across the qualitative interviews, participants said that natural spaces provided healing and restorative pathways. Through re-engagement with natural elements following experiences of loss, participants reported that they re-established emotional balance and a sense of calm. This process enabled them to transform feelings of disconnection into a sense of ecological belonging. Emotional, physiological, and spiritual forms of adaptation associated with self-transcendence were central to these experiences. Building on this, participants described how engagement with natural environments encouraged reflection on life, loss, and mortality. Many expressed that nature helped them accept change as part of a larger life cycle, promoting a sense of continuity beyond the self. This existential reflection supported greater acceptance of aging and loss, and reinforced feelings of peace, coherence, and meaning in later life.

According to research and participants’ responses, it appeared that in the face of late-life transitions, meaning, purpose, and satisfaction can be enhanced when individuals re-establish connections with the cycles of nature, the natural rhythm of birth, death, decay, and rebirth. Resilient coping is also supported through the dynamic interaction with nature, the individual, and sources of meaning. Time in nature and natural spaces increased calmness, acceptance, transcendence, psychological coherence, and spiritual belonging. Participants described time in nature as facilitating self-transcendence, which, in turn, strengthened relational connections, physical and social engagement, and promoted a sense of existential wholeness.

In the context of loss, engagement with natural spaces was also associated with increased awareness of one's place in the world and a greater understanding and acceptance of mortality. It also produced more positive emotions and an increased sense of wholeness and purpose.

Examples of comments included:

"If I could not walk in the park near my house, I do not know what I would do. My dog's ashes are buried here; my husband is also here in spirit. It makes me feel a part of something greater than myself and connects me with the past". Regina, 77-years-old participant.

"There is nothing as timeless as nature. It always makes me feel a little better about my life and my place in the world." Sondra, 74 years old.

During periods of transitional stress, participants reported that engagement in culturally sensitive eco-spiritual practices aided in coping by deepening their sense of meaning, increasing positive feelings, and promoting healing. As Dorrie, a 101-year-old participant, stated:

"Walking in nature has helped me during all my transitions in life. It connects me with those who are no longer here".

Nature-based coping strategies are related to life's fundamental existential concerns. For example, existential therapist, Yalom (1980) identified four core existential anxieties, Death, or awareness of mortality and anxiety about the inevitability of life's ending; freedom, involving the struggle to cope with the constraints of society as one attempts to continue to take responsibility of shaping one's own life; Isolation, or a fear of loneliness and isolation and the lack of social connectedness; and Meaninglessness, an overwhelming anxiety that life may lack meaning, purpose, and mattering.

These existential concerns were compounded by a fear of a future climate crisis and the need to take steps to help mitigate impending disasters relating to climate change. The need for contributing or generativity is lifelong [29]. In late life, generativity continues, and as the results of this study indicate, it can become more urgent. This is particularly the case in climactic crisis circumstances, when generativity desires and needs are enhanced by the limitation of time, combined with guilt over having lived one's life in a healthy climate and having been the recipient of comfort associated with climate exploitation. As one 90-year-old male participant stated:

"I do not care what happens to me. I want the world to be there for future generations, and I want the world to be livable."

Another participant mentioned a sense of generative satisfaction they received from activities focused on helping promote healthy, natural spaces. For example:

"Saturdays, we walk through the park clean, cut the ivy so it does not choke the trees, in the process, we talk and keep each other company." 76-year-old participant

Overall, coping through nature-focused rituals not only promoted personal acceptance and transcendence but also increased engagement with others. Nature-based walks were often conducted in groups, during which meaningful conversations took place. Time in nature also prompted existential reflection and healing, which enabled participants to confront mortality and reinforced a sense of continuity and connection beyond the self [30].

Conclusion

According to the results of this study and a critical analysis of the literature, several interrelated personal and cultural factors fostered resilient coping with later life transitions and loss. These included personal and culturally meaningful rituals, in particular, which facilitated the reconstruction of meaning, purpose, mattering, and transcendence. Transitions in later life can fragment a person's sense of self and identity; to maintain or regain ego integrity, it is important to acknowledge loss, including late-life losses and unresolved loss and trauma that may emerge from earlier life. In this study, we found that healing the self might involve personal rituals, engagement with cultural rituals, relying on creative rituals as an outlet, and connecting with natural spaces. Several participants also noted that healing the self was connected to engaging in activities that helped heal the planet.

Regardless of personal and social circumstances, resilience in the face of later life transition and loss is difficult, painful, and challenging. Coping rituals mentioned took many forms: praying, singing, chanting, telling stories, drinking tea or coffee, eating, walking, meditating--anything that is repeated with some regularity and has meaning for the person performing it. Rituals, of course, have existed across cultures and throughout history in every area of life. In psychology, though, the healing power of rituals has not received significant attention. In late life, particularly, rituals can help build and reinforce meaningful cultural practices and traditions. For those who are immigrants, particularly, culturally contoured rituals can help maintain a sense of social connectedness, a link to history and tradition. Rituals nurture memories of past experiences while promoting healing in the present. In a chaotic social and cultural reality, they can also provide a sense of peace and control.

In times of rapid change and instability, it is especially important to recognize how older adults can rely on personal and cultural rituals to enhance resilient coping amid fluctuating personal and social circumstances. The results of this study increase awareness and understanding of how older adults are able to achieve this goal. During turbulent times, personal and cultural rituals, creative activities, and connections with nature have the potential to enhance meaning, purpose, identity, and ego integrity in later life.

This study has several limitations. It is based on a small group of older volunteers; therefore, the findings have limited generalizability. However, the data was collected over nine years, allowing for the examination of personal and cultural changes across an extended timeframe. In addition, participants were

relatively healthy, community-dwelling older adults, which may limit the applicability of the findings to more medically frail or institutionalized populations. Furthermore, the study did not explicitly examine spirituality or spiritual guidance as distinct constructs, which may be an important area for future inquiry.

Future research could further explore how structured nature-based and creative interventions can be intentionally integrated into psychosocial support programs for older adults. Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies may also clarify how ecological engagement supports resilience, meaning-making, and self-transcendence across diverse aging populations.

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