

Review

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Review

The Role of Spiritual and Religious Practices, Pet Ownership, and Contemplative Practices in Successful Aging: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Background: Accelerating global population aging underscores the need to identify multidimensional determinants of successful aging. This review synthesizes evidence on social, spiritual, and religious factors that shape well-being, and quality of life in later adulthood. Successful aging is conceptualized as adaptation to age-related challenges through internal and external resources. Emerging research suggests that pet ownership and companion animals promote meaning, purpose, and social connectedness, while spiritual, religious, and contemplative practices support coping, psychological stability, and foster life satisfaction in older adults. **Methods:** This review of the literature examines the intersection of spirituality, religious practice, meditation, life purpose, and pet ownership as mediating and reinforcing influences on successful aging. This review focused on evidence linking prayer, meditation, chanting, and spiritual and religious participation to psychological, cognitive, and physiological outcomes, as well as literature exploring human-animal relationships in later life. **Results:** Findings indicate that spiritual and religious practices, companion animal relationships, and contemplative practices support core aspects of successful aging, including emotional well-being, reduced loneliness, enhanced coping, and greater life meaning. Yet, it remains unclear whether these influences act synergistically or independently, and how they shape older adults' experiences of aging and adaptation to decline. **Conclusions:** Incorporating spiritual, religious, and contemplative practices alongside companion animals may enhance holistic models of successful aging by supporting emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Future research should explore multidimensional mechanisms to inform interventions that improve quality of life in later adulthood.

Keywords: successful aging; spiritual practices; religious practices; contemplative practices; meditation; pet ownership; companion animals; resilience; quality of life; older adults; well-being; chanting

1. Introduction

Societal aging is a global phenomenon, with populations experiencing unprecedented increases in longevity. U.S. Census Bureau (2018) projected that by 2030, one in five Americans will be age 65 or older. This demographic shift presents complex challenges and opportunities for health professionals, researchers, and policy makers, who must address the rising prevalence of age-related chronic conditions, the demand for long-term care, and the need to promote physical, cognitive, and psychosocial well-being among older adults (World Health Organization, 2019). As longevity extends the lifespan, understanding the factors that contribute to successful and healthy aging has become a critical priority for both clinical practice and public health policy, emphasizing the importance of multidimensional approaches that integrate biological, social, and psychosocial determinants of health. Building on these demographic trends, researchers have increasingly focused on identifying the multidimensional factors that enable older adults to age successfully. Successful

aging is broadly defined as the capacity to maintain physical health, cognitive function, emotional well-being, and social engagement despite age-related challenges.

Traditionally, contemplative practices including meditation, prayer, breath awareness, and gratitude, have been associated with numerous physical and psychosocial benefits, including enhanced resilience, emotional regulation, and overall, well-being throughout the life span (Calderone et al., 2024). Emerging evidence highlights the significant roles of spirituality, religious engagement, life purpose, and companion animal relationships in promoting resilience, psychological health, and overall quality of life in later adulthood. By synthesizing research across these domains, this narrative review aims to provide a holistic understanding of how interconnected biological, social, and relational resources contribute to adaptive coping, life satisfaction, and well-being among aging populations.

2. Methods

This literature review is guided by a holistic conceptual framework that views successful aging in adults in older age as a multidimensional and dynamic process. Successful aging is conceptualized as the ability to adapt to age-related changes through the integration of biological, psychological, social, spiritual, religious, and environmental resources that support resilience, meaning, and quality of life. Robert Havighurst (1961) provided one of the earliest conceptualizations of successful aging, framing it as the ability to accomplish developmental tasks and adapt to life's changing circumstances across the lifespan. In this interpretation, aging was not viewed as a period of inevitable decline but rather as a stage in which individuals can achieve satisfaction and well-being through the successful completion of age-appropriate challenges. Subsequent scholars expanded this view by emphasizing the multidimensional nature of aging, incorporating physical health, psychological resilience, social engagement, and environmental support as essential components.

3. Discussion

Rowe and Kahn (1997) later advanced the concept by distinguishing between “usual” and “successful” aging, proposing a model that highlights low disease risk, high cognitive and physical functioning, and active social involvement. More recently, researchers have critiqued these models for underrepresenting the experiences of older adults over 80, particularly regarding the role of chronic illness, functional limitations, and socio-environmental barriers. As a result, contemporary frameworks increasingly emphasize adaptation, meaning-making, and holistic well-being suggesting that successful aging may be better understood as a dynamic process of resilience and purpose rather than a static state of optimal health. This evolving perspective underscores the need for research focused specifically on adults aged 80 and older, to identify determinants of successful aging that reflect the realities of advanced age.

Within the aging framework, biological factors should be considered. For example, functional status, chronic conditions, sensory changes as they interact with psychological and social factors, including coping, emotional well-being, social connectedness, and perceived support. Spirituality and religious practice are positioned as central adaptive resources that facilitate meaning-making, acceptance, and transcendence in advanced age. In parallel, meditative practices are increasingly conceptualized as mechanisms that support emotional regulation and psychological well-being in later life (Kurth et al., 2021). Pet ownership is likewise viewed as a complementary relational resource that can foster purpose, routine, companionship, and social engagement (McConnell, 2011; Brooks et al., 2018). Together, these factors may operate as mediating influences that shape the experience of aging and contribute to successful aging outcomes, including enhanced quality of life and resilience (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

Zimmer et al. (2019) conceptualizes religion and spirituality as constructs that share foundational roots within a broader framework linking humans, nature, and the divine. Religion is often defined as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and institutional expressions of

worship, whereas spirituality refers more to an individual's subjective sense of connection to transcendent or supernatural forces. Both constructs have been shown to influence psychological well-being by shaping meaning-making processes and coping responses. This influence is particularly prominent among older adults, who often draw upon religious and spiritual resources when navigating significant life transitions such as bereavement, advanced aging, and changes to the family structure. Kapri & Kathpalia (2019) explored the influence of spirituality on the well-being of older adults. Their research findings indicated that participants universally acknowledged spirituality as an important component of their lives. Spirituality was described as particularly important in later life, where it supported individuals in coping with the inherent limitations, challenges or losses associated with aging. The research concluded that this spiritual capacity was most strongly associated with improvements in the psychological domain of quality of life, fostering positive cognitions, emotional resilience, and an enhanced sense of life satisfaction.

Evidence examining pet ownership as a determinant of physical health among older adults aged 65 years and older demonstrates mixed and sometimes contradictory findings. Quantitative studies assessing the relationship between pet ownership and physical health outcomes, including cardiovascular risk and all-cause mortality, have yielded inconsistent results. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses report variable associations, suggesting that the health effects of pet ownership in later life may be influenced by individual and contextual factors (Bauman et al., 2020; Mubanga et al., 2019; Yeh et al., 2019). For example, a large longitudinal study found that dog ownership was associated with reduced cardiovascular risk and lower all-cause mortality among older adults; however, these benefits varied by dog characteristics and household composition, particularly among individuals living alone (Mubanga et al., 2019). Furthermore, according to Lytle (2021), the presence of animals in people's lives continues to increase, with many individuals viewing their pets as integral members of the family. Evidence suggests that companion animals can contribute to both physical and psychological well-being, potentially supporting more positive and beneficial aging outcomes.

Physical activity has been identified as a key mediating pathway linking pet ownership to physical health in older adulthood. Studies employing objective measures, such as accelerometers, indicate that older dog owners are more likely to meet recommended physical activity levels compared to non-owners (Feng et al., 2014). In contrast, a meta-analysis examining the association between pet ownership and obesity found no significant relationship. Nonetheless, evidence demonstrating an inverse relationship between walking and obesity suggests that routine activities associated with pet care, particularly dog walking, may indirectly support physical health and functional maintenance in later life (Miyake et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings suggest that pet ownership may contribute to successful aging through activity-related mechanisms, while underscoring the heterogeneity of outcomes among adults aged 65 years and older.

Pets frequently provide emotional support, alleviate loneliness, and contribute to a sense of purpose, while also promoting physical activity and daily routine (Wells & Treacy, 2024). In the context of aging, such psychosocial and behavioral benefits are consistent with emerging frameworks of successful and subjective aging that emphasize adaptive resources and well-being across later life (Sabatini et al., 2025). Animal-assisted interventions have been engaged in both individual and group therapeutic contexts, demonstrating benefits for mental health, stress reduction, and social engagement among older adults (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Souter & Miller, 2007). This role of pets is often described as a source of psychosocial support that is increasingly relevant to healthcare professionals in gerontological practice, including nursing, social work, and other health-related fields. In contemporary society, cats and dogs are the predominant companion animals, frequently integrated into household and caregiving environments. Notably, many of these studies include younger cohorts of older adults, highlighting the need for further research examining the role of pet ownership in physical health and successful aging specifically among adults aged 80 years and older. Yet, pet ownership and successful aging is becoming more prominent among the literature.

Research on aging indicates that older adults exhibit elevated levels of sedentary behavior and insufficient physical activity. Concurrently, a growing body of evidence suggests that pet ownership

may confer significant physical and psychological health benefits within this population (Neill et al., 2023). One notable study that included over 68,000 adults assessing the association of dog ownership and mental health demonstrated that dog owners were less likely to have mental illness than non-dog owners (Lui et al., 2019). Another case study investigated pet ownership in the daily lives of older adults. The study concluded that owning a pet could provide older adults with a sense of safety and it positively influences mood (Obradovic et al., 2020). A similar qualitative study by Gan et al. concluded pet ownership may be beneficial in older adults may provide a sense of comfort and safety; purpose, routine, and structure; and a meaningful role for the owner. According to McConnell et al. (2011) pet ownership minimized negativity by providing mental and physical benefits to the owners because of the support that exists along with filling a social need.

Emerging research suggests that companion animals may contribute to successful aging by addressing fundamental existential and relational needs. Empirical literature demonstrates the human and animal bond can fulfill core psychological needs for acceptance, attachment, purpose, and unconditional regard (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2020). From a holistic perspective on successful aging, companion animals may serve as meaningful spiritual resources. Many older adults experiencing bereavement, social contraction, or diminished familial proximity may find pets provide continuity of meaning, embodied presence, and relational transcendence. This relational spirituality is not necessarily doctrinal but reflects a lived experience of connection, mutuality, and stewardship that can support existential coherence in advanced age. Theologically informed perspectives further position companion animals within broader narratives of creation, interdependence, and care, reinforcing a sense of belonging within a larger moral and spiritual order. This circumstance may contribute to a positive spiritual connection and life purpose.

4. Results

A growing body of evidence further supports the health-promoting effects of pet interactions and ownership across physical, spiritual, social, and psychological domains. Mechanisms proposed in the literature include stress-buffering effects, oxytocin-mediated bonding responses, enhanced social engagement, and sensory attunement such as olfactory and behavioral responsiveness that may strengthen perceived connectedness and emotional regulation (Kurdek, 2009; Walsh, 2009; Zablan et al., 2024). Animal-assisted interventions, particularly those involving canines have demonstrated therapeutic benefits across diverse clinical contexts, including stress reduction, pain management, and psychosocial stabilization (Potvin-Belanger et al., 2022). Collectively, the literature suggests that companion animals overall may function as multidimensional assets in later life, contributing to physical activity, social engagement, emotional resilience, and spiritual well-being. These are key domains consistently associated with successful aging.

Beyond psychosocial and physiological benefits, theological traditions provide additional interpretive frameworks for understanding the spiritual significance of pet ownership in later life. Within the Franciscan tradition, animals are regarded as reflections of divine creativity and as relational counterparts within a shared created order (Crane, 2021). This theological anthropology emphasizes interdependence, reverence for life, and the moral kinship of all living beings. Practices such as blessings of animals and liturgical acknowledgment of non-human creation further underscore this interconnectedness. Notably, some Franciscan perspectives include the possibility of eschatological continuity that encompasses non-human creatures. Such views resonate with ecological and biodiversity frameworks that situate humans within, rather than above, complex living systems. In the context of successful aging, these religious interpretations may deepen the spiritual meaning attributed to companion animals, positioning them not merely as sources of comfort but as participants in a spiritually formative relationship.

Emotionally supportive engagements, such as prayer, chanting, and meditation, may also contribute to successful aging by buffering stress and enhancing psychological resilience, enhancing emotional well-being, and promoting physical health, including blood pressure regulation (Kapri & Kathpalia, 2019). These activities operate through psychosocial and physiological pathways,

fostering adaptive coping, positive affect, and resilience in older adults. Together, these practices highlight the interconnection of emotional, social, and spiritual resources in promoting an overall beneficial quality of life. In addition, engagement in prayer, communal worship, sacramental participation, and other forms of religious observance has been associated with enhanced meaning-making, resilience, and psychological well-being among older adults (Malone, 2020). These practices often provide structured opportunities for reflection, gratitude, forgiveness, and hope capacities. Religious participation often provides continuity of identity, social engagement, that mitigates loneliness and existential distress (Gemar, 2024). Within multidimensional models of successful aging, religious practice may therefore function not only as a coping mechanism, but as an integrative domain that sustains spiritual vitality, emotional stability, and perceived purpose in the later life course (O'Sullivan, 2024).

Prayer has been widely viewed as a supportive resource in later life, contributing to adaptive aging processes. Prayer has been shown to reduce catastrophic thinking when used in the context of coping (Rapp, Rejeski, & Miller, 2000), foster divine trust (Krause, 2009), and encourages encourage spiritual practice and promote meaning and purpose (Dunn & Robinson-Lane, 2020). According to Craig et al. (2023) it provides comfort in times of social isolation. Prayer when used to cope has also been framed as part of self-regulation in aging populations. Among retirement home residents, prayer ranked among the most frequently utilized pain management strategies (Kemp et al., 2005). Research situating prayer within complementary and alternative medicine further underscores its prevalence as a holistic health practice (Quandt et al., 2012). More recently, prayer has been integrated into spiritual care frameworks, emphasizing its role in promoting whole-person well-being (Craig et al., 2023). Collectively, this body of research suggests that prayer may serve as a psychosocial and spiritual resource that supports resilience, self-significance, and overall positive aging.

Perry, Polito, & Thompson (2021) alternatively investigated the relationship between chanting practices and psychological outcomes, examining attributes such as quality, and intensity across spiritual traditions. Their findings indicate that greater intentionality and engagement in chanting are associated with altered states of consciousness and cognitive benefits, which in turn enhance overall quality of life. Different practices of chanting were found to produce specific effects, with some practices primarily supporting cognitive functioning and others facilitating shifts in consciousness. From the perspective of successful aging frameworks, such as those proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1997) and Havighurst (1961), these findings suggest that intentional engagement in prayer and or chanting may promote key dimensions of aging well, including cognitive vitality, emotional well-being, and meaningful life engagement.

5. Conclusions

Addressing individualized needs may enable older adults to leverage religious, spiritual, cognitive, and companion animal related resources to enhance resilience, maintain purpose, and optimize life satisfaction as part of the successful aging process. Recent research suggests that contemplative practices may play a protective role in cognitive and brain aging. Studies indicate that meditation can slow telomere attrition (Alda et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2020) and reduce age-related loss of gray matter (Luders et al., 2016), both of which are key biological markers associated with cognitive decline. These benefits are thought to arise from meditation's capacity to reduce stress and promote positive mood, although the precise mechanisms remain under investigation (Kurth, Cherbuin, & Luders, 2017). Cross-sectional studies show that long-term meditators experience less gray matter decline and exhibit a younger cognitive age compared to age-matched non-meditators (Luders et al., 2025). Longitudinal case data from Tibetan Buddhist meditation, spanning more than a decade, provide further evidence that sustained meditation practice may support neuroplasticity and cognitive resilience over time. Neurological research on meditation offers some of the most detailed and balanced examinations of Buddhist-inspired practices (Datta & Newberg, 2020).

From the perspective of religious and spiritual practice in the context of aging, there remains a critical need for deeper examination of the distinct and collective impact of these practices in later

life. Although prayer, meditation, chanting, and spiritual behaviors have been individually associated with psychological, cognitive, and physiological benefits, less is understood about how these practices function together or independently to influence aging trajectories. Greater conceptual clarity is needed regarding whether these practices exert synergistic effects or operate through distinct mechanisms. Moreover, insufficient attention has been given to how such practices shape and reflect older adults lived experiences, including meaning-making, coping, identity formation, resilience, and perceptions of health and decline. Advancing this line of inquiry would strengthen understanding of how religious, spiritual and contemplative engagement contributes to successful aging and overall quality of life into advanced adulthood

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