Self-care for health and wellbeing – a literature review

Dr. Sc. Lumturi MERKURI
European University of Tirana, Faculty of Medical Science, Tirana, Albania

Prof. Asoc. Dr. Fatjona KAMBERI
Scientific Research Centre for Public Health, Faculty of Health, University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Albania

Msc. Doreada MIO
Scientific Research Centre for Public Health, Faculty of Health, University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Albania

PhD Jonilda GABRANI
European University of Tirana, Faculty of Medical Science, Tirana, Albania

Abstract

Introduction: *Self-care concept is not a new idea, but during the scientific era that strengthened the authority of health care providers, the use of self-care became less valued. Self-care has major benefits for individuals and health care systems. Many factors influence self-care and several tools have been developed to measure an individual's ability to self-care. Health workers play an important role helping people understand and use self-care practices.*

Aim: *To provide an overview on self-care approach to better understand different aspects of self-care as important intervention for improving health and well-being.*

Methodology: *A series of recently published articles in PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science as well as WHO guidelines related to self-care were identified*

and used for this review. A database of selected articles was created, and a reference list compiled.

Results: *The effectiveness of self-care interventions has been found in several published articles. In patients with various diseases, higher levels of self-care are associated with better health outcomes, including reduced hospitalizations, costs, and mortality. Various studies report that self-care is influenced by several factors such as: age, education, socio-economic and health education level, geographic environment, and family support. WHO has developed competency standards for health workers to support people's ability to self-care.*

Conclusions: *Humanitarian crises-armed conflict, natural disasters, major disease outbreaks have a significant impact on global health and require innovative strategies that go beyond the health sector. There is growing evidence of the effectiveness of self-care interventions for improving health and well-being. Health workers have a key role in implementing and promoting self-care interventions.*

Keywords: *self-care, health, wellbeing, quality of life, self-care measurement*

Introduction

The concept of self-care is not new, but it has recently received a new focus in global health policy. It originated with theorist Dorothea E. Orem in 1956 and has evolved over the years to the present day [1]. The World Health Organization defines self-care as "the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability, with or without the support of a health professional" [2]. Self-care has major benefits both for individuals to take a stronger role in their own health and for the health care system by reducing the unnecessary use of health care resources and eases the pressures on health systems which are growing. Currently, much of the world's population lives in humanitarian crises, where health systems are challenged to provide essential services and many others have no access to essential health services at all. Pandemics such as COVID-19, armed conflict and climate change also hamper and stretch health services around the world [2]. The ability of individuals to care for themselves can play a crucial role in the prevention, management, and rehabilitation of various health conditions, including diseases.

Self-care interventions are among the most promising for improving health and well-being. The global burden of chronic non-communicable diseases as well as so-called "lifestyle diseases" results to a significant extent from individuals' lack of self-care skills. The benefits of self-care interventions have been documented in several documents, culminating in the publication of the World Health Organization Guidelines for Self-Care Interventions in 2019, previsioned on 2022 [3].

Several tools have been developed to measure an individual's ability to self-care for specific health issues or for different population groups [4], but no general self-care instrument exists [5].

A series of factors influence self-care in different health issues and different target groups [6]. Understanding how individuals make health decisions and what factors influence these decisions is critical to ensuring a strong self-care environment.

Many self-care interventions require the support of competent health workers to help people understand and use effective self-care approaches and tools. Although health workers play an important role in helping people understand and use self-care approaches, WHO suggests that there is an urgent need to find strategies that go beyond the health sector's response [3, 7]. The aim is to provide an overview on self-care approach to explore and better understand different aspects of self-care as an important intervention for improving health and well-being.

Methodology

A search of the most published literature was conducted, including peer-reviewed articles, full-text publications and available WHO strategy documents, to find relevant articles related to self-care issues. Recently published scientific articles in PubMed, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science as well as WHO self-care guidelines were used for this review. An initial search was undertaken using a range of keywords, including 'self-care', 'self-management' or 'self-esteem'. A database was created, and a reference list compiled with all identified articles as presented in the references chapter.

Results

The concept of self-care remained vague until the late 20th century, when self-care began to become necessary with the rise of chronic diseases [8]. The oldest definition of self-care, which is cited by many articles, is the WHO definition, which dates to 1983 [9,10].

According to the available data, over half of the world's population is lack access to essential health services [11], health worker shortages are estimated to reach 10 million by 2030 [12] and 130 million people are in need of assistance under global threats of humanitarian crises [13] and pandemics such as COVID-19. These factors point to an urgent need to explore innovative strategies that go beyond health-sector response, such as self-care interventions [3].

Our overview found that the most innovative and effective approaches that support self-care for all health issues are self-care interventions. WHO defines self-care interventions as the evidence-based, quality tools that support self-care and include medicines, medical devices, counselling, diagnostics and/or digital technologies, etc. [3, 14]. WHO recommends self-care interventions for each country as a critical intervention to achieve universal health coverage, to reach people in humanitarian situations, to help them gain more control over their health [3].

Our overview found that much of the literature supports self-care as one of the primary care interventions for patients that enables them to make diagnostic and therapeutic decisions, self-manage the disease, and achieve optimal outcomes in health restoration [8, 15, 16, 17, 18].

Many studies showed that in patients with various diseases, especially chronic diseases, higher levels of self-care are associated with better health outcomes, including reduced hospitalizations, costs, and mortality [19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24]. Several studies also showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need and vital role of self-care behaviors in saving lives was more important. Using some life-saving self-care interventions with patients such as wearing masks, social distancing, have been an asset during COVID-19 periods of lockdown [3, 8, 25, 26, 27].

United Nations agencies estimate that self-care interventions are among the most innovative and efficient approaches, also for sexual and reproductive health and rights, for which greater commitments and investments are needed [28]. The effectiveness of self-care interventions in sexual and reproductive health has been found in several published articles [29, 30, 31].

We also found out that various publications emphasize the importance of promoting self-care as a cost-effective approach that significantly reduces the use of medical services and health care costs. Also, there is a need to understand and implement effective self-care promotion interventions in different health care settings [32,33].

Depending on the specific health issues, self-care is influenced by several factors such as family support, age, educational level, economic level, level of health education, geographic and sociocultural environment. Various studies have found that low education, poor socio-economic status, poor family support and lack of social support, not receiving health education were significantly associated with poor self-care practice, for both individuals and health care staff [34,35,36,37,38,39,40,41,42]. Self-care can be undertaken independently by a health care worker, but many self-care interventions require the support of health workers. WHO has developed competency standards for health workers to support people's ability to self-care [7,43].

There are several self-care measurement tools that address key aspects of self-care practices for health and well-being, but there is no comprehensive self-care assessment instrument that monitors and assesses all key aspects of self-care [4,16,24,44,45].

Conclusions

There is growing evidence for the effectiveness of self-care interventions in communicable and non-communicable diseases. Self-care interventions provide opportunities for individuals to make informed decisions about their health. WHO has developed the Self-Care Interventions guideline, which provides evidence-based recommendations for self-care interventions to improve health and well-being. Health workers have a key role in implementing and promoting self-care interventions, but there is a need to strengthen the capacity of health workers to support their clients' self-care effectively and safely. Various tools exist to measure individual self-care ability, but there is a need to develop a comprehensive tool that assesses individual self-care ability to include a wide range of self-care practices. Promoting self-care is a cost-effective approach and significantly reduces the use of medical services and health care costs.

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