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**Personal and Regulatory Resources in Achieving Educational and Professional Goals in the Digital Age**

**COPING WITH STRESS OF GROWING OLDER IN MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN**

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*Abstract*

The aim is to establish stress-coping patterns connected with life changes experienced by middle-aged women affected by appearance concerns: if they cope with the stress of growing older. Hypothesis: Women who are constantly using caring aesthetic manipulations to rejuvenate their outlook do rather cope with the stress of aging than stick to addictive behavior. To cope with negative self-perception stress women too much concerned about their outlook are included in the experimental group (N1 = 54; av. age 48 yrs; SD = 6) who actively, persistently and constantly (at least several times a month and for at least a year) use aesthetic manipulations in the medical center; the control group do not resort to manipulations (N2 = 54; av. age 48 yrs; SD = 6). Method: a longitudinal research - interview, consumers' behavior analysis; psycho-diagnostics. Results: stress and discomfort caused by attractiveness loss, the continuity and regularity of various manipulations (improving face and body) are confirmed. Half of women use rejuvenation (non-surgical) services from 4-5 to 11 times a month. The factors of their behavioral activity are women's outlook dissatisfaction, high level of appearance relevance and value, stress caused by outlook attractiveness the loss with age, according to their subjective opinion. The analysis of young outlook as value that influences decision-making during changes showed that this way women actively cope to reduce stress and fear of the future, improve relationship with the loved ones. At the same time, they risk becoming behavioral addicts, seeking to increase positive emotions, and sense of security.

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## **1. Introduction**

In a modern society people are increasingly faced to stressful situations that impact on their activities, changing their biochemical, physiological, psychological status, and behavior. Stress level depends on the perceived personal relevance of a situation, which is determined motivationally (attitudes and needs), emotionally and intentionally, cognitively in all spheres of personal activity (Scott et al., 2011). All they together determine ways of reacting to a difficult situation / hardship: both the use of ego-defensive mechanisms and the will to overcome, choosing more conscious coping-strategies intended to act directly to reduce the source of stress or stress outcomes (Kryukova, 2017; Kryukova & Vorontsova, 2019). For a special group of middle-aged women (from 40 to 60 years old), awareness of growing older, natural age-related changes in the appearance (skin turgor and elasticity decline, wrinkles and folds, gravitational ptosis, change in body contours, etc.) are especially frustrating factors. They trigger defensive processes of denial and resistance. Middle age is a complex, intermediate time period, a kind of a straight line with a single vector, striving forward to late decrepit years and death. A middle-aged person feels isolated from both the young and the elderly/late adulthood (Craig & Baucum, 2018; Ebner et al., 2006; Riediger et al., 2005). Women and men often experience stress of aging - basically, the negative state of tension and anxiety caused by signs of reduced opportunities noted in oneself connected with feeling, acting, and looking well (Baltes, 1994). The women we study use a lot of strength, resources, time and money in order to preserve a young outlook as long as possible. An outlook is considered among main attributes of a personality, an important interpersonal relationships regulator (Labunskaya, et al., 2019; Schnackenberg, 2016). It is already known that the perception and evaluation of one's own appearance impacts on self-esteem and Self-concept as a whole (Faustova, 2017; Kryukova, Osminina, 2019). Often getting older as aging is perceived as the time when a person becomes more vulnerable, less able to stand stress and cope with difficult situations (Babakova, 2017; Baltes et al., 2006; Gutmann, 1994; Sergienko, 2018). Aging is an inevitable natural process, but for some people, more often for women, than for men a changing outlook causes everyday chronic stress: these are people who are particularly sensitive to outlook changes and affected by appearance concerns, who consider their outlook the important life value. Identification of the emotional value attitude to an external outlook aging as a traumatic process / phenomenon and ways of coping with stress of aging, are significant factors for sustaining personal subjective well-being.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The research problem is to establish stress of life changes connected with aging patterns experienced by middle-aged women and possibilities of defensive / addictive or coping behaviour.

## **3. Research Questions**

Hypothesis: Women who are constantly using caring aesthetic manipulations to rejuvenate their outlook do rather cope with the stress of aging than stick to addictive behavior.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to identify how middle-aged women cope, if at all, with the stress of aging and excessive concerns about their outlook.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Sample: an experimental group (N1 = 54; average age 48 years old; SD = 6) includes women who actively use aesthetic manipulations in the medical center for rejuvenation with persistent constancy (at least several times a year and for at least a year) his appearance; a similar control group of women did not resort to manipulation (N2 = 54; average age 48 years old; SD = 6). Research method: a semi-structured interview and content analysis; analysis of consumers' behaviour; Self-esteem questionnaire (Blake, 1984); Self-attitude questionnaire (SAS-MIS, Stolin & Pantileev, 1988); Ego-mechanisms defence inventory" (Subbotina, 2013).

#### **6. Findings**

One of the authors has the ability to conduct a long-term monitoring of the behavior and psychological state of female clients in the medical center (during 3 years, and has more than 20 years of professional experience in this organization). Middle-aged women consulting with a cosmetologist, and a psychologist about the appointment of anti-aging procedures (especially in initial consultations) were significantly concerned about undesirable age-related changes in their face and body, complained about everyday irritability, nervousness, and fatigue, expressed negative thoughts especially about their helplessness, loneliness, fear of the future. These are signs of stress. The common behavior analysis of women in the experimental group as consumers of aesthetic medicine services showed the regularity, the habit to use various manipulations to rejuvenate their outlook (various injections, physiotherapy, manual, etc. medical procedures): 40 % of women have used these services constantly for more than 10 years; 30 % – more than 5 years; 30 % – less than 5, but not less than 3 years long. A quarter of women visited the center once a month; further 2-3 times a month – 30 %; 3-4 times a month – 28 %; more fanatical clients – from 5 to 11 times a month (about 20 %). In addition, the fact of strong preoccupation with their own outlook was confirmed by interviews' with the studied group of women analysis. The answer to the question "How often do you think how your look?" was ranked from 1 to 5 points. The maximum possible number of points (5) was assigned to this question by 40 % of women, "4" – 29 %, "3" – 31 %. As one can see, the vast majority of group members were highly concentrated on their own outlook, moreover, the focus of this concentration was aimed specifically at the young appearance. Almost everybody noted that they did not like the vivid aging signs in their appearance (wrinkles and folds, a blurry fuzzy face outline, overhanging eyelids, extra weight, etc.). The level of anxiety about these negative external signs of face and body state was evaluated with a 5-point Likert scale. 90 % of the total number of subjects rated their anxiety high (from 5 to 4 points). Moreover, 92 % of women identify anxiety related to their outlook with stress. Most of women in the experimental group evaluated their social status higher than other women`s (as special, the best). All participants without exception were sure that the use of anti-aging procedures improved their lives (had a positive effect on interpersonal

relationships, professional success and activities, increased self-esteem, and enhanced the feeling of their own attractiveness) (in the interview). The interview data correlated well with the results of self-esteem psychodiagnostic data analysis (Blake, 1984). Significant differences between participants of the experimental and control groups in terms of self-esteem were revealed: there were more women with high self-esteem in the experimental group than in a control one ( $p < 0.023$ ). The analysis of self-attitude scale data (Stolin & Pantileev, 1988) showed the following results: in the 1st group of middle-aged women transforming their outlook indicators of 3 out of 9 subscales had higher scores (significant differences by the t-criterion) in self-confidence ( $p < 0.01$ ), reflected self-attitude ( $p < 0.004$ ) and self-worth ( $p < 0.005$ ). The scores of defensive ego-mechanisms confirmed that 61 % of women in the experimental group use rationalization, 25 % - sublimation, and 17 % projection (thus the majority had mature defenses).

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, a special group of middle-aged women has been studied, relating to their own outlook as a value and at the same time as a stressor. Aware of the negative age-related changes in their appearance, they experience distress, negative emotions, anxiety. Though external manifestations of aging are natural, women in the experimental group are not ready to accept this situation, do not want to belong to an elder age group. High focus on young outlook as an obligatory fact makes women find a way to correct, resolve a negative situation or to remove the stressor. In a changing reality self-regulation mechanisms are included that allow individuals to adapt to changes and sustain high level of subjective well-being. The use of anti-aging procedures in the medical center is a targeted social behavior that helps a subject cope with a stressful life change. At the same time, the absence of any conscious action strategies, “doing nothing” in this category of women can lead to depression and somatic symptoms (Labunskaya et al., 2019). By designing their younger outlook women in the experimental group manage the impression they have on others, own experience, improve relationships with the loved ones, co-workers and subordinates, reduce fear of the future (according to an interview), and increase self-worth and self-esteem. Studying the cognitive-behavioral processes of human adaptation to life changes, i.e. everyday stressors, causing tension, uncertainty, etc. we have established some patterns of stress and coping experienced by a person. More than half of the women in the experimental group use rationalization as a defensive mechanism, unconsciously trying to make the current situation manageable, regulated, predictable in their lives. They are trying to justify their own unwillingness to age-related changes in appearance, to maintain the status quo of a life situation. Middle-aged women, who attribute young outlook to important life values, become dependent / addictive on a constant desire to make sure that they are attractive and young as before, essentially denying older age (for themselves) as a life perspective. Any signs of aging evoke negative emotions and feelings. Medical anti-aging procedures are giving a good effect, reduce anxiety, and bring satisfaction and pleasure. Accordingly, women in the experimental group like this state of things, and persistently seek help and service from aesthetic medicine. The above mentioned facts are confirming the hypothesis that behavioral activities, which manifest themselves in constant and regular use of aesthetic procedures by middle-aged (getting older) women who are especially sensitive to changes in the outlook are ambivalent. On the one hand a consciously chosen behavioral activity to reduce stress is surely coping behaviour, on the other hand, and at the same time it looks like defensive dependent behavior. These

women demonstrate a tendency to form behavioral addiction, trying to get the desired anti-aging effect again and again, achieving positive emotions, a sense of security. The use of medical manipulations is becoming a rooted habit. This fact is also confirmed in the modern threatening spread of the coronavirus COVID-19: despite the risk of being infected and a lockdown, these women, as before, are actively trying to use the services of beauty industry.

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