

# Older Adults and Mental Health



## Introduction

About 2 in 10 older adults (~20 million Americans) have a diagnosed mental health condition, including anxiety, psychotic disorders, and mood disorders.<sup>1</sup> Although mental health concerns affect a significant portion of the population, less than half of affected individuals undergo treatment.<sup>2</sup> The majority of older adults with a mental health disorder are diagnosed with a type of depression.<sup>1</sup> Signs of depression can be difficult to identify in older adults which results in delaying or forgoing treatment. Neurological disorders, such as dementia, also affect many older adults. Additionally, older adults may also be affected by chemical dependencies, which are often not identified in older adults.<sup>3</sup> Older adults have higher rates of suicide than other age groups. Older adults are a vital part of communities, and their contributions affect the workforce and families.

## How does aging affect mental health?

Older adults have higher risks of having chronic illnesses and co-morbid conditions.<sup>4</sup> Many older adults have complex medical needs, which can be unmet in the community. Many older adults experience changes to their mood and cognition as they age, although these changes are not a normal effect of aging. Additionally, older adults often experience stressful life events, including financial challenges and deaths of loved ones.<sup>5</sup> The majority of older adults adapt to these life changes, but many older adults experience difficulties adjusting which may lead to mental health challenges. Once diagnosed, older adults have effective treatment options, but many people go undiagnosed and therefore untreated.

## Myths about mental health and older adults



Feeling depressed is a typical effect of aging



There are no effective treatments



Older adults do not need treatment for chemical dependencies



Every older adult will have memory loss or dementia



Physical health is more important than mental health

## Risk factors for older adults and mental health concerns

Older adults may have a heightened risk for mental health challenges if they:

- Have significant physical limitations, such as chronic pain or limited mobility;
- Experience elder abuse, including physical, financial psychological, sexual, and verbal abuse;
- Have been affected by bereavement or grief; or
- Experience isolation or loneliness.

## Barriers to mental health services for older adults

### Mental health conditions can be difficult to diagnose.

Older adults experience changes in their mood and affect due to their prescription and nonprescription medications. Older adults are more likely to have chronic health conditions, which require treatment and medications.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, some older adults do experience cognitive, functional, and sensory changes, and this makes it difficult to detect and diagnose mental health conditions.

**Difficulty with service delivery.** Older adults are less likely to seek mental health treatment than their younger counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, they tend to seek mental health support from non-medical providers, such as religious organizations. Many older adults rely on caregivers or reside in nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Often, older adults do not have transportation to their appointments or people to accompany them to the doctor. During the Covid-19 pandemic, telehealth options became more prevalent, but many older adults prefer in-person appointments or are uncomfortable with virtual service delivery models.

**Mental health treatment can be expensive.** Many older people view mental health care as an additional expense outside of physical health care. While Medicare covers some mental health treatment, many older adults must pay co-pays for their appointments.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, many mental health care providers do not accept Medicare which makes it difficult for older adults to find providers in their communities.

### Limited workforce of geriatric mental health providers:

One of the most significant barriers to improving mental health access for older adults is a lack of mental health providers trained in geriatric psychology and psychiatry.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the older adult population in the United States is incredibly diverse, which is not reflected in the population of mental health providers serving them.

## Research Spotlight: Social Isolation, Depression, and Psychological Distress Among Older Adults<sup>7</sup>

*Harry Owen Taylor, MSW, MPH, Robert Joseph Taylor, PhD, MSW, Ann W. Nguyen, PhD, MSW, and Linda Chatters, PhD*

In this study, the authors evaluate social isolation based on survey data and current social isolation literature. Up to 40% of older adults experience some form of social isolation, which means that a significant portion of the population may be at risk for resultant mental health challenges. Older adults tend to be at risk of social isolation due to their typically small social circles. In the study, the authors evaluated both objective (physical distance from family and friends) and subjective (a person's perception of their own isolation and social networks) social isolation. The authors found that some forms of social isolation are linked to worse mental health among older adults in the United States. Subjective social isolation from friends and family was associated with mental health distress, specifically depressive symptoms. Objective social isolation was not linked to mental health concerns, which highlights the importance of an individual's perception of their own isolation compared to objective measures of isolation. Based on these findings, it is imperative that mental health providers consider social isolation when treating mental health conditions in older adults.

## Signs someone may need help with their mental health:<sup>5</sup>

- Prolonged feelings of hopelessness or guilt
- Loss of interest in activities that used to bring joy or excitement
- Experiencing thoughts of suicide
- Changes to appetite, both overeating and not eating
- Low energy and difficulty paying attention or remembering details
- Changes to sleep, including insomnia, waking up very early in the morning and sleeping too much

## Next Steps

If your mental health is negatively affecting your life, then it may be time to speak with a healthcare professional, such as your primary care provider.

Your provider will typically do a physical exam to make sure there are no physical health reasons behind your symptoms. If there are no signs of physical illness, your provider may discuss referring you to a licensed mental health provider such as a clinical social worker, psychologist, or psychiatrist.

Mental health providers can discuss your symptoms and assess if you have symptoms consistent with a mental health disorder, such as anxiety or depression. They may also discuss treatment options such as:

- **Talk therapy:** Some older adults may benefit from discussing their feelings and experiences with a trusted mental health provider.
- **Managing your stress:** Stress can have negative effects on mental health. Techniques like meditation, mindfulness, and deep breathing can improve mental health.
- **Exercise, sleep, and diet:** Simple modifications to your daily routine can improve mental health, such as taking a walk or sitting outside.
- **Medication therapy:** When determined to be necessary, some older adults are prescribed medication to help manage their symptoms.

## Resources



The [AARP's Mental Health Center](#) is a resource hub with information related to a number of mental health-related topics.



The [National Institute for Mental Health](#) provides free resources on older adults and mental health. The NIMH also provides information on mental health conditions, treatments, and clinical trials.



[SAMHSA](#) has a number of products for serving older adults with mental and substance use disorders that can be useful to clinicians, other service providers, older adults, and caregivers.



The [National Council on Aging](#) provides information on different topics related to older adults and behavioral health. The NCOA Advisor is a platform that assists older adults with finding mental health providers.

## Ways to take care of your mental health

Social isolation and loneliness can have significant effects on a person's mental health, especially older adults.<sup>9</sup> Here are some tips for combatting these feelings:



Spend time doing any activity that you enjoy or take a class to learn about new hobbies.



Set aside time for connecting with your friends and family every day by email, social media, text, phone call, or video chat.



Adopt an animal if you feel able to care for them. Animals have a positive effect on both mental and physical health.



Find ways to be physically active, including joining clubs or group exercise classes.



Engage with local programs at social service agencies, community and senior centers, faith communities, and public libraries.



Find a cause that you care about and get involved in your community.

## If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available.

**988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** The Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. Call or text 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. Support is also available via live chat. Para ayuda en español, llame al 988.

**Veterans Crisis Line:** This helpline is a free, confidential resource for veterans of all ages and circumstances. Call 1-800-273-8255, press 1; text 838255; or chat online to connect with 24/7 support.

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