



Developing a Better Understanding

THE AGING POPULATION & MENTAL HEALTH

The proportion of older adults in the United States is rapidly increasing, in part due to longer life spans. Mental health and well-being are important components of healthy aging, and they are essential to a high quality of life for individuals of all ages. As the number of older adults rises, so does the need for mental health services and systems that meet the unique needs of this population. However, access to specialized mental health services for older adults is already constrained and may not be able to meet future demands. According to the 2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), approximately one in five adults over 50 years old experienced a mental health condition, substance use disorder or both in the previous year. When looking specifically at mental health, data shows that approximately 14 percent of adults over 50 experienced any mental illness and 3 percent of adults aged 50 or older experienced a serious mental illness.

As people age, they may experience certain life changes that impact their mental health. These changes may include the death of a loved one, retirement, or dealing with a serious illness. Although many people will adjust to these life changes, some may experience feelings of grief, social isolation, or loneliness. When these feelings persist, they can lead to mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety. Some of the warning signs of mental health disorders in older adults include: changes in mood or energy level, withdrawing from the people and activities, feeling unusually confused, forgetful, angry, smoking, drinking, using drugs more than usual, or thinking of harming oneself or others.

Prevalence

Substance use has been on the rise among older adults for many years. Yet less than half of older adults with mental health and/or substance use problems receive treatment. The most common mental health conditions for older adults are depression and anxiety.

Mental health conditions among older people are often underrecognized and undertreated, and the stigma surrounding these conditions can make people reluctant to seek help.

Risk factors

At older ages, mental health is shaped not only by physical and social environments but also by the cumulative impacts of earlier life experiences and specific stressors related to aging. Exposure to adversity, significant loss in intrinsic capacity, and a decline in functional ability can all result in psychological distress.

Older adults are more likely to experience adverse events such as bereavement, a drop in income, or a reduced sense of purpose with retirement. Despite their many contributions to society, many older adults are subject to ageism, which can seriously affect people's mental health.

Social isolation and loneliness, which affect about a quarter of older people, are key risk factors for mental health conditions in later life. Many older people are caregivers of spouses with chronic health conditions, such as dementia. The responsibilities of such care can be overwhelming and can affect the caregiver's mental health.

Some older adults are at greater risk of depression and anxiety, because of dire living conditions, poor physical health, or lack of access to quality support and services. This includes older adults living in humanitarian settings and those living with chronic illnesses (such as heart disease, cancer, or stroke), neurological conditions (such as dementia), or substance use problems.

Promotion and Prevention

Mental health promotion and prevention strategies for older adults focus on supporting healthy aging. That means creating physical and social environments that support well-being and enable people to do what is important to them, despite losses in capacity.

For older adults, social connection is vital to reduce risk factors such as social isolation and loneliness. At this stage of life, meaningful social activities can significantly improve positive mental health, life satisfaction, and quality of life; they can also reduce depressive symptoms. Example interventions include befriending initiatives, community and support groups, social skills training, creative arts groups, leisure and education services, and volunteering programs.

Protection from ageism and abuse is also critical. Key interventions include anti-discrimination policies and laws, educational interventions, and intergenerational activities. A range of caregiver interventions – including respite care, advice, education, financial support and psychological interventions – can support caregivers to maintain a good and healthy caring relationship that avoids abuse of older people.

Treatment and Care

Prompt recognition and treatment of mental health conditions (and associated neurological and substance use conditions) in older adults is essential. This should follow standards for integrated care for older people, which is community-based and focused on both the long-term care of older adults living with mental health conditions and declines in intrinsic capacity, as well as the education, training, and support of caregivers. A mix of mental health interventions is usually recommended, alongside other supports to address the health, personal care, and social needs of individuals.

Dementia is often an important concern. It affects people's mental health (for example, sparking symptoms of psychosis and depression), and requires access to quality mental health care.

Responding to the abuse of older adults is also critical. Promising interventions include mandatory reporting of abuse, self-help groups, helplines, emergency shelters, psychological programs for abusers, training of health care providers, and other caregiver support interventions.

Key mental health promotion and prevention strategies for healthy aging include:

- **measures to reduce financial insecurity and income inequality;**
- **programs to ensure safe and accessible housing, public buildings and transport;**
- **social support for older adults and their caregivers;**
- **support for healthy behaviors, especially to eat a balanced diet, be physically active, refrain from tobacco and reduce alcohol use**
- **health and social programs targeted at vulnerable groups such as those who live alone or in remote areas and those living with a chronic health condition.**

It's important to recognize and treat mental disorders in older adults. These disorders don't just cause mental suffering. They can also make it difficult to manage other health problems. This is especially true if those health problems are chronic. Effective treatment options are available to help older adults manage their mental health and improve their quality of life. Recognizing the signs and seeing a health care provider are the first steps to getting treatment.

Sources: National Council on Aging National Institute of Mental Health SAMHSA World Health Organization