

Issue Brief

Behavioral and Mental Health Needs in Older Adults

PREVALENCE OF MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ISSUES IN OLDER ADULTS

More than 20 percent of patients older than 60 have a neurological or mental disorder. The most common conditions that lead to disability in this population are dementia and depression. Other common behavioral conditions include anxiety and substance abuse.¹

- Because its symptoms can be similar to those of other diseases, depression is often missed in older adults, which may lead to unnecessary suffering or impaired daily function.
- Dementia in older adults presents as a deterioration in memory and thinking and is most commonly caused by Alzheimer's disease. Contrary to common belief, this cognitive decline is not a normal part of aging and is one of the most debilitating conditions that an older adult can have.²
- Late-life anxiety is more common than both depression and dementia. Older adults who have decreased physical capabilities are at higher risk of developing anxiety due to fear and vulnerability.³
- Substance abuse is a growing problem among older adults, with alcohol being the most commonly abused substance. Some reports indicate that up to 20 percent of older adults abuse some type of substance, including prescription drugs.⁴

Factors such as limited mobility, increased chronic diseases, financial stressors and loss of independence often lead to social isolation and loneliness and can contribute to poor mental health in older adults. This public health issue is frequently underestimated and unrecognized. Furthermore, the social stigma associated with mental and behavioral health conditions often prevents older adults from seeking help.¹

DEMOGRAPHICS AND RISK FACTORS

- Non-Hispanic white males over the age of 85 are most likely to commit suicide.⁵
- Women are more likely than men to have substance abuse problems.⁴
- The majority of older adults with dementia are in low- and middle-income countries.²
- Risk factors for vascular disease, such as obesity, tobacco use, physical inactivity and diabetes are also considered risk factors for dementia.²
- Older adults with other chronic medical conditions are more likely to experience mental health issues.⁶

CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

- In the United States, the number of people older than 65 is projected to increase from about 40 million to 72 million by the year 2030.¹
- In Texas, the number of older adults is expected to triple between 2010 and 2050.⁷
- By 2050, older adults will make up 22 percent of the Texas population. This rapid increase will warrant an increase in health services and support for older Texans.⁷
- The number of people in the world with dementia in 2016 was 47.5 million. This number is expected to increase to 75.6 million by 2030 and to 135.5 million by 2050.²
- In 2001, the number of older adults in the United States with substance abuse problems was 1.7 million. It is anticipated this number will grow to 4.4 million by 2020.⁵

The increasing rates of mental health disorders in older adults indicate the need for early screening and recognition to prevent significant declines in quality of life and increased health care costs.¹ Furthermore, because older adults are less likely to seek medical attention if they experience symptoms of mental illness, it is vital that we work to remove the stigma associated with neuropsychiatric conditions.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION⁶

- Change in sleep patterns
- Social withdrawal
- Loss of appetite
- Anxiety
- Decreased concentration
- Restlessness
- Guilt
- Loss of energy
- Confusion
- Unexplainable physical aches and pains

SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA²

- Difficulty communicating
- Forgetfulness
- Losing track of time
- Becoming lost in familiar places (such as home)
- Wandering
- Repeating questions
- Difficulty walking



RECOMMENDATIONS⁸

Early recognition and treatment of neuropsychiatric conditions are key to preventing a decrease in quality of life. Regular exercise can also provide positive mental health benefits.

- Seek professional help if you experience symptoms of depression, dementia or anxiety.
- Remember that depression is treatable and does not have to lead to a decreased quality of life.
- Stay connected with family and friends. Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.
- Stay involved in activities you enjoy or find alternatives if those are no longer feasible.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

- Mental Health Texas mentalhealthtx.org/.
- World Health Organization—Active and Healthy Ageing who.int/ageing/active_ageing/en
- World Health Organization—World Health Days who.int/campaigns/world-health-day/2017/en
- World Health Organization—Mental Health Action Plan who.int/mental_health/action_plan_2013/en
- Texas Department of State Health Services—Mental Health and Substance Abuse dshs.texas.gov/mhsa.
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center sprc.org/states/Texas

CITATIONS

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