



Mental Health and Aging *Public Policy Brief Summary*

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“Americans are living longer and enjoying better physical health in their retirement years than ever before. However, the nation is failing to address the growing mental health needs of its older citizens.”¹

Mental health is an essential part of overall health for people at every stage of development, including the transitions associated with aging. Addressing the mental health needs is an essential part of the aging process, yet one that has historically been neglected. This has begun to change, as more people recognize that health and well-being during aging includes mental as well as physical health.

Many adults make the transitions associated with aging without encountering mental health problems. However, those who do experience problems are less likely to seek treatment than younger adults. Reasons for this include: Stigma about mental health issues, lack of recognition or denial of problems, under-recognition by professionals, lack of access to mental health services and insurance benefits, shortage of mental health professionals in general as well as those specifically trained in geriatrics, inability to seek help due to debilitating symptoms, caregiving responsibilities that don't allow time for the caregiver's mental health.

Mental health disorders such as paranoia, depression and dementia are among the most debilitating illness affecting older adults. Many older adults may not be aware these disorders are treatable.

Adults age 65 and older have the highest rate of suicide of any age group in the U.S. For those 85 and older, the suicide rate is twice the national average.

Policy Recommendations From Research

- β Implement educational initiatives to teach people of all ages about the aging process and the relevance of mental health, in part to help reduce the stigma that prevents people from seeking the services they need.
- β Remove restrictions on insurance reimbursement for mental health services, and eliminate inequities in insurance coverage for mental health services so it has parity with physical health coverage.
- β Support new research on the causes and treatment of mental illness in older adults.
- β Fund and implement community-based mental health services for older adults, including services in non-hospital, outpatient settings such as community centers.
- β Train health care professionals in geriatric mental health and the care of older adults with mental illnesses.
- β Develop culturally competent service providers to address the mental health needs of the diverse aging population.
- β Provide mental health treatment to people in nursing homes who need those services.