

Issue At A Glance:

Mental Health and the Aging Population

As the world experiences a rapid increase in its aging population, mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders, pose significant challenges, often exacerbated by aging and ageism. This brief explores the growing demographic shift, the UN Decade of Healthy Aging and mental health resources for the aging population.

Introduction

The world's population is rapidly aging. In 2020, over one billion individuals were aged 60 and over and it is estimated that it will rise to 1.4 billion by 2030, representing one in six people globally.¹ Furthermore, by 2050, it is estimated that the number of individuals aged 60 and over will reach over 2.1 billion and those aged 80 and over will triple between 2020 and 2050 to reach 426 million.^{1,2}

Mental health issues in older adults are frequently overlooked and not adequately addressed, and the social stigma associated with these conditions can discourage individuals from seeking help. Additionally, they may face challenges like reduced mobility, frailty, chronic pain, dementia, and other health issues that may require long-term care.¹ According to the Global Burden of Disease Health Estimates 2019, around 14% of adults aged 60 and over live with a mental disorder.^{1,3} Furthermore, over one fourth of deaths from suicide (27.2%) are among people aged 60 and over.³

This brief will provide an overview of ageism, the United Nations Decade of Healthy Aging, and mental health resources for the aging population.

Elderly Mental Health Statistics⁴

- 2 million** Adults aged 65 and older suffer from some form of depression.
- 68%** Of adults aged 65 and over know little or almost nothing about depression.
- 38%** Of adults aged 65 and older believe that depression is a physical health problem.
- 58%** Of adults aged 65 and older believe that it is normal for people to get depressed as they get older.
- 3%** Of adults aged 65 and older received treatment from mental health professionals.

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Mental Health and Aging

Encompassing the emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing, mental health is critical at all ages and stages of life. As individuals age, they can experience various life altering moments that influence their mental wellbeing, such as coping with the loss of a loved one or a serious illness. While many individuals can adapt to these changes, some may encounter emotions of mourning, social seclusion, or solitude. If these emotions persist, they can contribute to mental disorders like depression and anxiety.⁵

Depression and Aging

While older adults are more susceptible to depression, it is essential to note that depression is a treatable medical condition and is not a natural aspect of the aging process. Depression is more common in people who have other illnesses, such as heart disease or cancer, or whose function has become limited. Nearly 80% of older adults have at least one chronic health condition, and 50% have two or more. Of note, older adults are often misdiagnosed and undertreated due to healthcare

providers mistaking an older adult's symptoms of depression as a natural reaction to illness or life changes.⁶

Loneliness and Social Isolation in Older Adults

Loneliness and social isolation among older adults are serious public health risks that affect a significant number of individuals across the nation and put them at risk for dementia and other serious medical conditions.⁷ A study by the national Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine report that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely and nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated.^{7,8} According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, loneliness is defined as the sense of solitude, irrespective of social interactions, while social isolation is the lack of social connections. Some may experience loneliness due to social isolation, while others may feel lonely despite being socially connected.⁷

Ageism and Elder Mistreatment

Globally, research has shown that 1 in 6 individuals aged 60 years and older experience elder abuse annually, with potentially severe physical and mental health, social, and financial consequences.⁹ Furthermore, the prevalence rate of elder abuse is high in long-term care facilities and has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{9,10,11} However, despite its severity, elder abuse remains a low global priority and receives little attention from national organizations and governments.⁹ Ageism (stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice based on age) is a common type of discrimination in the US.¹² Furthermore, the existence of ageism in healthcare is detrimental for the aging population as they are more likely to need medical care as they age, potentially leading to lower quality of care, discriminatory practices, and preventable illness and disability.¹³



United Nations Decade of Healthy Aging (2021-2030)

The United Nations Decade of Healthy Aging is a global initiative that aligns with the final 10 years of the Sustainable Development Goals and aims to enhance the wellbeing of the aging population, their families, and the communities in which they reside.¹⁴ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), healthy aging is characterized as the ongoing development and preservation of functional ability, fostering wellbeing in older age. Functional ability encompasses the capabilities that empowers individuals to pursue and achieve what they find valuable. This can include an individual's ability to meet their basic needs; be mobile; contribute to society; learn, grow, and make decisions; and build and maintain relationships.¹⁵ The Decade aims to address the following four areas for action.

Age-Friendly Environments

Health and wellbeing are shaped not solely by genes and individual traits, but also by the physical and social contexts in which we navigate daily existence.^{16,17} Age-friendly environments can offer improved spaces for growth, living, working, playing, and aging. By addressing the social determinants of healthy aging, age-friendly spaces can be created where individuals of all physical and mental capacity can engage in valued activities and lead dignified lives. The WHO works with Member States to foster age-friendly cities and communities, including support for the Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities.¹⁶

Combating Ageism

Ageism influences our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors toward others and ourselves based on age, creating significant obstacles to effective policies and programs for both older and younger

individuals. Its detrimental impact extends to the health and wellbeing of older adults.^{16,18} The WHO aims to transform attitudes and behaviors toward age and aging by generating evidence on ageism, forming a global coalition against ageism, and creating tools and resources for others to act.¹⁶

Integrated Care

As age increases, various physiological changes occur, raising the likelihood of declines in both physical and mental capacities, including visual impairment, hearing loss, cognitive decline, mobility loss, depressive symptoms, and falls.^{16,19} Older adults require a range of services to address physical and mental declines, delivered in a person-centered and coordinated manner to prevent financial strain. The WHO aids Member States in developing and implementing person-centered, integrated care models through evidence, guidance, and resource packages.¹⁶

Long-Term Care

Long-term care systems facilitate the provision of necessary support, aligning with basic rights, fundamental freedoms, and human dignity. These services not only address significant declines in capacity, but also contribute to reducing inappropriate use of acute healthcare, preventing financial burdens on families and enabling broader social roles for caregivers.^{16,20} Access to quality long-term care is crucial for preserving their functional ability, upholding basic human rights, and ensuring dignified living. The WHO offers technical assistance to nations in conducting national situation analyses of long-term care, aiming to integrate a minimum package of such care within universal health coverage.¹⁶

Mental Health Resources for the Aging Population

Despite quality treatment and robust support systems, the aging population can struggle with access to necessary mental health care. Below are resources that can aid them and their caretakers in self-care and health improvement:²¹

- **[Administration on Aging](#)**: The Administration on Aging is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offering links to resources, programs, and agencies covering a range of topics on mental health among senior adults.²²
- **[National Council on Aging](#)**: The organization offers a range of services and links to services for senior adults.²³
- **[Cognitive Aging Efforts](#)**: From the American Psychological Association (APA), the Cognitive Aging Efforts offers publications, activities, and webinars related to APA initiatives on age-related cognitive decline.²⁴
- **[Alzheimer's Disease and Related Symptoms](#)**: From the National Institute on Aging, the website provides articles and advice for dealing with cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's.²⁵
- **[Coping with Stress and Anxiety](#)**: From the APA, the website provides information about how stress affects health and what to do about it.²⁶
- **[Senior Corps](#)**: This organization connects adults 55 years and older with volunteer opportunities near them to keep them socially and mentally engaged.²⁷

If you or anyone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, call or text 988 or visit 988lifeline.org. For an immediate medical crisis, please call 911.

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Did you know?

Over 93% of adults aged 50 to 80 reported experiencing at least one of 10 forms of ageism.²⁸



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