



# AGING WELL LIVING WELL



News & Information Provided by the Administration on Aging  
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## Older Americans' Mental Health Week: May 23-29, 2004

Older Americans' Mental Health Week provides a framework for national, state, and local public activities to educate the public and policymakers that mental illnesses among the aging are real, common, and treatable. Despite advances, mental illness among the elderly is routinely underdiagnosed and undertreated. Research shows that treatments for common mental illnesses like depression are as effective among older adults as they are in younger people. Mental and physical health are integral to each other and to well-being. The more people know about mental health and aging, the more they can help themselves and others.

### FACTS ABOUT OLDER AMERICANS AND MENTAL

#### INCIDENCE OF MENTAL ILLNESS

- One in five Americans—young and old and in-between—has a diagnosable mental disorder during a one-year period. (National Institute of Mental Health/NIMH).
- The most common mental disorders for adults aged 55 and older are anxiety, mood disorders, and severe cognitive impairment. (American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry/AAGP).
- Out of 35 million older Americans, two million are estimated to have a diagnosable depressive illness, and another five million exhibit significant symptoms of depression.
- 11.4% of older adults over 55 have an anxiety disorder (NIMH).

#### CO-OCCURRING HEALTH PROBLEMS

- When common medical problems are accompanied by depression or another mental health problem, older adults take more visits to primary care physicians, use more medications and are more likely to be admitted to the emergency room or hospital (NIMH).
- Medical treatment outcomes are worse when complicated by mental health problems. For example, rehabilitation from a hip fracture or a heart attack is less successful and more expensive when complicated by depression (NIMH).

#### SUICIDE

- Although adults aged 65 and older comprise only 13% of the U.S. population, they accounted for 18% of the total number of suicides that occurred in 2000 (NIMH).
- The highest rate of suicide (19.4 per 1,000) is among people aged 85 and over, a figure that is twice the overall national rate. The second highest rate (17.7 per 100,000) is among adults aged 75 to 84 (American Association of Suicidology/AAS).
- 75% of older Americans who commit suicide have seen a physician within the month prior to the act (NIMH).
- The elderly have a considerably higher suicide completion rate than other groups. While for all age groups combined there is one suicide for every 20 attempts, there is one suicide for every four attempts amongst adults who are 65 and older (AAS).
- One elderly suicide occurs every one hour and 39 minutes (AAS).



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## TREATMENT

- Mental illness among the elderly is routinely under-diagnosed and under-treated; up to 75% of depressed older Americans are not receiving the treatment they need (AAS).
- It is estimated that only 1/2 of older adults who specifically consult with a physician about mental health problems receive any type of treatment. Only a small fraction of those who undergo treatment receive specialty mental health services (AAGP).
- Up to 4/5 of nursing home and 2/3 of community residing older adults in need of psychiatric services fail to receive them.
- The combination of psychotherapy and anti-depressant medication appears to be the most effective treatment for older people suffering from depression. One recent study shows that 80% of older adults recovered from depression after receiving such combination treatment (AAGP).
- Medicare covers just 50% of mental health services for older adults (AAGP).
- Consequences of untreated psychiatric disorders in older people include diminished functioning, substance abuse, poor quality of life, and increased mortality.

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*This fact sheet was prepared by the Older Women's League (OWL). The Administration on Aging and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, agencies within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services supports the efforts of OWL to raise awareness about this very important issue. For more information on Older American's Mental Health Week contact OWL, 1750 New York Ave. Suite 350 Washington, DC 20006 • Phone: 202-783-6686 • Fax: 202 638-2356 [www.owl-national.org](http://www.owl-national.org) • [owlinfo@owl-national.org](mailto:owlinfo@owl-national.org).*