



LATER LIFE MENTAL HEALTH  
AND DEMENTIA



**This information sheet will look at some of the commonly occurring mental health conditions that occur in later life, as well as providing some tips to improve your quality of life in your retirement years.**

We have decided to include a section on dementia as, whilst there is debate about whether this is a mental or physical condition, it does affect mental faculties, so we think it's important to include it here.

**W**e accept that the terms 'older adults' and 'later life' are often subjective. For the purpose of this brochure, we'll be using these terms to represent those aged fifty years or older. In cases where studies represent older age groups we will make sure this is made clear. (We also acknowledge that many people do not feel that fifty years old represents later life and most people at this age are continuing to live normal working lives.)

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With populations around the globe having longer life expectancies there is an increased focus on the health of older adults, including their mental health. Poorer mental health is often mistakenly thought to be par for the course when people get older; however, this is not the case. Many older adults live their lives free from mental health problems. In fact, Australian researchers found that most mental health problems have occurred prior to 30 years of age and later diseases are often secondary to an existing disorder. Japanese researchers have built on this, finding that having a severe mental health problem makes you more susceptible to further

disorders. Older adults are however more vulnerable to mental health problems and suffer them more chronically than other age groups. They are also more likely to suffer from psychological distress that does not reach diagnosable



levels. Having the belief that mental health issues are expected in older age unfortunately prevents people from seeking professional help and causes an under-reporting of symptoms. Unreported mental health problems can also go on to perpetuate further mental health issues and can even lead to the worsening of physical symptoms. This is unfortunate as many mental health conditions can be managed and treated, leading to an improved quality of life.

## Why do older adults develop mental health problems?

There are a number of changes that occur in older adults and in later life that can impact the mental wellbeing of a person. Whilst in some countries, like the UK, there is no longer an official retirement age, many people will take retirement at some point. Retirement is a drastic change to a person's life and whilst there are many positives, it's important to remember that it brings a lot of changes that can impact a person's mental health.

Retirement often means a reduction in finances, potentially a reduction in social contact and a loss of structure. All of these aspects can put an older person at risk of mental health problems. Physical health changes and a subsequent loss of independence can also put older adults at risk of mental health problems, especially depression, which is discussed in more detail below.

Discrimination and cultural perceptions of older adults can also impact mental wellbeing. A feeling of not being required, or not being needed, has been associated with poor mental health. This has been seen in China where previous generations had a culture of revering older generations and relying on them for advice. Newer generations do not subscribe to this same cultural approach, and as such, an increase in older adult mental health issues has been seen. More direct age discrimination is also a great cause of poor mental health. Luckily many countries have laws to protect older adults from this discrimination, especially in the workplace; for instance the UK has the Equality Act 2010.



## Mental Health problems commonly seen in older adults

Globally, an estimated 15% of adults over the age of 60 suffer from at least one mental disorder (WHO, 2017); with common disorders being anxiety and mood disorders such as depression. In the UK, half of adults aged 55 and over experience common mental health problems (NHS, 2017). For those who are ages 65 and over, 1 in 4 live with a common mental health condition (Age UK, 2019).

- 7.7 million adults aged 55 and over experience depression (NHS, 2017).
- 7.3 million adults aged 55 and over have suffered from anxiety (NHS, 2017).
- Approximately 1 in 5 (21%) who reported suffering from depression or anxiety claim that their symptoms worsened as they got older (NHS, 2017).

**Common triggers of mental health problems in those ages 55 and over include:**

- Financial worries, affecting 27%
- Bereavement from loved ones, affecting 36%
- Suffering from other health issues, affecting 24% (NHS, 2017).

## Below we discuss the prevalence of three commonly seen mental health problems seen in older adults.

### Depression

Depression is a low mood that lasts for an extended period of time such as weeks or months. Symptoms of depression may include increased fatigue, loss of interest and episodes of tearfulness. Depression can inhibit day-to-day living and can cause people to consider suicide. Unfortunately, when dementia and depression appear together in a person they can be difficult to distinguish from each other due to some overlapping symptoms. This is especially problematic for older adults as they are most susceptible to dementia, and as such, depression is more likely to go undiagnosed. Unfortunately, along with the symptoms of depression itself, a diagnosis of depression has been shown to adversely affect other aspects of a person's general health, and can complicate other chronic conditions. In the USA, older adults with depression are more likely to visit the doctor, visit the emergency room, or use medication, than other age groups.

Depression is suspected to be the most prevalent mental health problem amongst older adults in the USA and, whilst not a normal part of the ageing process, symptoms do tend to increase as age advances. For those ages 65 and over, depression is the most common mental health condition, affecting 22% of men and 28% of women (Age UK, 2019). For older people who are living in care homes, 40% have depression, 30% of older carers experience depression at some point and older people going through a bereavement are up to four times more likely to experience depression than older people who haven't been bereaved (Age UK, 2019).

These figures show that more efforts need to be made in improving the quality of care being given to older adults in longer term facilities. However, it may also be argued that those who are in care facilities may be less physically able and will have lost their independence - both big risk factors for mental health problems. As such, it would be unfair to lay all the blame on the care facilities themselves. It would also not be advisable to use these statistics as a justification for not using care home facilities when required.

As with most mental health conditions, older adults are known to not seek treatment for depression, in part because they may believe that it is part of the ageing process. This has led to vast amounts of sufferers going untreated. This is particularly alarming given that most cases of depression are treatable.

Hopefully, with campaigns highlighting that this is not part of the ageing process, older adults will start to seek treatment for their depressive symptoms, leading to an improved quality of life.

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety is a term that refers to a number of different disorders that focus around intense worrying, fear and nervousness. Whilst you can break anxiety down into its composite disorders, for the purpose of this leaflet we will keep the disorders grouped under the term anxiety.

Anxiety is one of the most prevalent disorders in older adults in the USA and is almost as prevalent as depression. In fact, anxiety often appears alongside depression with half of those suffering from depression also suffering from anxiety. It is believed that anxiety is as common in older adults as it is in younger adults, which is the age group most likely to be impacted by anxiety. Anxiety disorders affect 3.8% of the older population (WHO, 2017).

### **Suicide**

When we talk about suicide we are talking about both the action of taking one's own life, and also thinking about taking one's own life (known as suicide ideation). If you are reading this and are considering suicide, or believe you know of somebody who is at risk, then it is important to seek medical help immediately. More information about suicide, as well as some contact numbers can be found on our website [www.shawmind.org](http://www.shawmind.org)

Whilst suicidal thoughts do not always lead to suicidal behaviours, they are still a troubling symptom. Older adults are not immune to suicidal ideations. In almost all countries, older individuals show the highest suicide rates; in the US, 48.7 per 100,000 older white men attempt suicide (Conejero et al., 2018). In rural China, 140 per 100,000 men attempt suicide (Conejero et al., 2018); with the rate of suicide increasing for those older than 60. It is likely that these

numbers are under reported due to cultural opinions relating to suicide, and the belief that these thoughts are part of the ageing process, which is not the case. When considering the risk factors for suicidal behaviour in older adults, the most prominent factors for suicidal death include bereavement, becoming a widow or widower, having other mental disorders and suffering from a physical illness.



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### **Dementia**

Dementia is a term used to define a group of conditions that result in a progressive decline in mental ability. Whilst symptoms can vary greatly, dementia affects at least two of the following core functions; memory, communication and language, reasoning, problem-solving, concentration and perception. There are many types of dementia, with the most common disorder being Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's disease is thought to make up 60%-70% of all dementia cases globally (WHO, 2021). Whilst anybody can be affected by dementia, older adults are especially susceptible to Alzheimer's disease, with 95% of cases thought to have an onset after the age of 65.

Dementia worldwide is a substantial problem. Estimates suggest that 55 million people are currently suffering with dementia and there are almost 10 million

new cases every year (ADI, 2020; WHO, 2021). This number will almost double every 20 years, reaching 78 million in 2030 and 139 million in 2050 (ADI, 2020). Whilst dementia can affect those in any age group, it is substantially more likely to affect those over 65 years old. In the UK, dementia ranks as one of the main causes of disability in later life, ahead of some cancers.

Whilst we may be quick to assume that care homes need to be rethought because of this statistic, we must remember that people may be in the care home due to dementia.

Many people are unaware that dementia is a disorder that often results in death. As such, managing symptoms as soon as possible is key. Dementia is currently the seventh leading cause of death among all diseases and one of the major causes of disability and dependency among older people globally (WHO, 2021).

## How to stay mentally healthy

There are many things that a person can attempt to do to stay mentally healthy. In some cases there will be the need for treatments and medications in order to stay healthy. Below are some ideas for older adults to keep mentally healthy before they require medication or treatment.

### Plan ahead for changes

Retirement involves a great deal of change. A person's finances, social interactions and general life schedule are likely to change. It is important to plan ahead for retirement so older adults can transition into this new life with ease. Putting money aside in a retirement fund will help the financial transition from a full time job to a pension which can otherwise be a very stressful time. Planning how to keep in contact with work friends after leaving a job will also ensure a reduced risk of social isolation in retirement.

### Avoid social isolation

Relating to the above point, older adults will want to avoid social isolation. Not all people will want to remain in contact with work colleagues, but there are a number of options to maintain alternative social relationships. There are often a number of social groups aimed at the retired and older adults that encompass all sorts of interests and hobbies. Other groups hold coffee mornings where people can meet others of the same age. Many people are often reluctant to join these types of groups but it is important to avoid social isolation which is a big risk factor for poor mental health.





### **Find new hobbies**

Finding new hobbies and pursuing old hobbies is a great way to fill time in retirement. This can also relate to avoiding isolation as many hobbies can lead to groups of people with shared interests. A new hobby not only provides a person with something entertaining to pass the time, it also helps them find a new identity after work life, and can provide a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

### **Keep an active mind and body**

As with all age groups, it is important for older adults to remain physically active. Obviously, as people grow older they may have more physical limitations and may need more assistance, but for the most part, there will still be some physical activity that they can do. For those that are physically able, then clubs and sports aimed at older adults are ideal, e.g. swimming and aerobics. For those that are less able, going for a short walk to the local shop and back may be the limit of what can be achieved, but this is still a great accomplishment. Not only does it provide the physical exercise the body needs, it also provides a sense of accomplishment. If people are less able to walk to the local shop then there are short exercises that can be completed in the home that help to keep a person healthy. Local health care providers are likely to have specific exercises available on request and may be able to provide staff to assist.

It is important to remember to keep the mind active to help avoid cognitive degeneration. There are a number of ways a person can keep their mind active and they do not have to be highly academic tasks. Older adults may keep their minds active by reading books or by completing the puzzle page in the daily newspaper.

### **Make time for yourself**

Whilst this may stand in contrast to the majority of our other tips that propose socialising, this tip is vital. It is important for older adults to remember to take time for themselves to clear thoughts and to relax and recover. We are not suggesting extended periods of isolation but we do suggest that people take time out for themselves, even if it is just an hour in a day. Retirement can be a busy time, with new hobbies and friendships being made, as well as helping out in new family roles. But it is important to remember that older adults will need their own time and it is okay to say no when family members have made plans for them.

### **Diet and Sleep**

Diet and sleep patterns have long been proven to impact mental health and this is no different for older adults. Ensuring a healthy intake of fruit and vegetables, as well as limiting smoking and excessive drinking are all key in maintaining positive mental health. A healthy sleep routine is also vital. This includes a regular time for going to sleep and waking up, as well as limiting stimulants such as coffee and access to computer screens, prior to going to bed.

### **Talk about concerns**

As we have previously mentioned in this leaflet, older adults are thought to under report their instances of mental health problems. This is in part due to a reluctance to talk about problems. Therefore one key tip to staying healthy is to talk about any concerns you may have. These concerns may not be directly health related, they may be about anything in life, but not talking about them may cause a build-up of stress which can lead to poor mental health. If these concerns are medical then you may be best suited talking to a healthcare professional. But don't forget, simply talking to another family member about your concerns in life can go a long way in preserving your mental health.

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This leaflet has given you a brief outline of some of the key areas of mental health in older adults. You can get lots more information on all aspects of mental health at our website: [www.shawmind.org](http://www.shawmind.org)



Suite 4, Navigation House,  
48 Millgate, Newark, Nottinghamshire  
NG24 4TS, United Kingdom

[contact@shawmind.org](mailto:contact@shawmind.org)

[www.shawmind.org](http://www.shawmind.org)

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