Aging and Mental Health

NASW-CA Presentation
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3 Hours/CEUs
Section 2: Introduction

Older adults experience many challenges and adjustments. Good mental health enables a person to face these changes and deal with them.

When mental health issues are identified and treated, they do not have to interfere with leading a rewarding life.

Many older people still believe the myth that mental health problems result from personal failure or weakness.

This stigma keeps them from admitting to a problem or symptoms and seeking help.
Mental Illness Defined

Mental illness is a health term used for a group of mental conditions that cause severe disturbances in thinking, behavior, feeling, and relating, which often result in a substantially diminished capacity to cope with the ordinary demands of life and distress.

Aging and Disease

Being old is not the same as being ill. However, physical illness and mental health issues are related to the aging process.

Aging Successfully

Physical & mental health are interconnected.

- People who have physical problems, like heart problems and diabetes, are more likely to develop mental health problems.
- People with depression or anxiety are more likely to develop physical problems.
Aging Successfully

- Depressed older adults spend three times the amount on health care as seniors who are not depressed.
- Unfortunately, old age is often used as an excuse to avoid treating the elderly or providing mental health services.

Normal aging involves gradual changes.

It is very rare for these changes to happen abruptly.

Factors Influencing MH

- Anxiety and/or depression.
- Lack of basic nutrition.
- Alcoholic beverages.
- Prescription medications—some may cause depression or anxiety.
- Over-the-counter (OTC) drugs—some may interact with prescriptions.
Factors Influencing MH

- Vitamins and herbal or other nutritional supplements.
- Lack of exercise.
- Stress due to change and loss.
- Physical illness.
- Isolation.

Elderly and MH

Nearly 20% of individuals age 55 and older experience mental disorders that are not part of the normal aging process.

In order of prevalence, the most common mental health disorders are anxiety, severe cognitive impairment, and mood disorders.

Elderly and MH

- Mental disorders in older adults are underreported.
- Compared to any other age groups, the suicide rate is highest among older adults.
- The highest suicide rate is found in those age 85 and older, a rate that is twice the overall national rate.
Elderly and MH

The number of older adults with mental illness is expected to increase from four million in 1970 to 15 million in 2030.


Estimated Prevalence of Major Psychiatric Disorders by Age Group

Resource: Jeste, Alexopoulos, Bartels, et al., 1999

Unmet Need for Treatment

- Less than 3% of older adults receive outpatient MH treatment by specialty MH providers. (Olfson et al, 1996)
- Only 33% of older adults, who live in the community and need MH services, receive them. (Shapiro et al, 1986)
Poor Quality of Care

- There is an increased risk for inappropriate medication treatment. (Bartels, et al., 2002)
- One in five older adults is given an inappropriate prescription. (Zhan, 2001)

Poor Quality of Care

- Older adults are less likely to be treated with psychotherapy. (Bartels, et al., 1997)
- There is a lower quality of general health care with an associated, increased mortality rate. (Druss, 2001)

Late Life MH Models

1. Psychodynamic Model.

What the Elderly Want

- To stay in familiar surroundings.
- To maintain autonomy.
- To maintain a maximum level of physical, social, and cognitive function.

Adults’ Worst Fears


Most Americans fear boredom and death far less than living in a nursing home, being lonely, and being mentally incapacitated by Alzheimer’s Disease (AD).

- Living for yrs in a nursing home 64%
- Developing AD 56%
- Being a financial burden 47%
- Being lonely 36%
- Loss of physical attractiveness 34%
- Death 28%
### Common Emotional Reactions
- Grief
- Guilt
- Loneliness
- Depression

- Anxiety
- Sense of impotence and helplessness
- Rage

### Major MH Issues for the Elderly
- Anxiety
- Cognitive Competence
- Depression
- Fear of Aging
- Obsessive-Compulsive

- Paranoia
- Psychoticism
- Somatization
- Mania
- Substance Abuse

### Dementia
- An acquired impaired mental functioning that is not the result of an impaired level of arousal.
- It is comprised of impairments in at least 3 of the following areas: language, memory, visuospatial skills, personality or emotional state, abstraction, or judgment.
- It is a progressive state.
Depression

A clinical syndrome characterized by lower mood tone, difficulty thinking, and somatic changes precipitated by feelings of loss and/or guilt.

Delirium

Delirium is a mental disturbance characterized by acute onset, disturbed consciousness, impaired cognition, and an identifiable underlying medical cause.

Delirium is a confusion state that can be reversed.

Delirium is the least well-known of the three “D’s,” --- dementia, depression, and delirium.

Dementia

- The vast majority of older adults are not suffering from any form of dementia.
- Those who are in the early stage of dementia (e.g. Alzheimer’s Disease or multi-infarct dementia) may be undiagnosed and susceptible to self-neglect.
Dementia Intervention

- The first intervention step is diagnosis and appropriate medical treatment.
- Practitioners must identify effective strategies for intervening when clients with dementia are uncooperative.

Types of Dementia

- Alzheimer’s Disease (AD).
- Vascular.
- Alcohol-related.
- Frontotemporal: a clinical syndrome caused by degeneration of the frontal lobe of the brain, which may extend back to the temporal lobe.
- Other: there are over 40 “other” types.

Types of Dementia

- Dementia of the Lewy body (LB). Autopsy studies suggest that LB accounts for 10% to 20% of dementias.
- Up to 40% of patients with AD have concomitant LB, characterized anatomically by the presence of Lewy bodies, clumps of alpha-synuclein, and ubiquitin protein in neurons, which are detectable in postmortem brain biopsies.
Dementia Features

- Elderly may underestimate risks and continue driving.
- They may experience severe mood swings.
- Delusions and hallucinations are common.
  - The most common are delusions concerning persecution.
- Violent behavior and suicide may occur.

Brain of Normal Elderly Person

Brain of Alzheimer’s Patient
10 Warning Signs for AD

1. Memory loss.
2. Difficulty performing familiar tasks.
3. Problems with language.
4. Disorientation of time and place.
5. Poor or decreased judgment.
6. Problems with abstract thinking.
7. Misplacing things.
8. Changes in mood or behavior.
10. Loss of initiative.

Causes of Dementia-like Symptoms

Illness, Malnutrition, and Overmedication

- Many illnesses (e.g. low grade infections, endocrine imbalance) may result in dementia-like symptoms.
- If left untreated, these symptoms may interfere with older adults’ ability to care for themselves.

- For a variety of reasons, an older adult may be malnourished (due to poor nutrition, physiological changes, etc.), which can create dementia-like symptoms.
- Latrogenic disorders can create dementia-like symptoms.
- Medical diagnosis and treatment a key intervention.