

Some facts and comments about the mental health of elders

Extracts mainly taken from First (2006) and second (2007) reports from the UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Well-Being in Later Life, coordinated by Age Concern

1. Three million older people in the UK experience symptoms of mental health problems
 - Up to 25% of people aged over 65 years living in the community have symptoms of depression, and about half of these (10-15% of all older people) meet the clinical criteria for a diagnosis of depression. And dementia affects 5% of those aged over 65 years and 20% over 80 years.
 - These numbers are set to increase by a third over the next 15 years.
 - By 2051 there could be as many as 5 million older people with depression and 1.7 million with dementia.
2. Most will be treated in primary care. Approximately 22% of people aged 65 and over (i.e. 2.1 million) visited their GP in the last two weeks; around 40% of whom will have had a mental health problem. However:
 - Only a third of older people with depression discuss it with their GP and less than half of these are treated for depression.
 - Nearly half of older people who take their own lives visit their GP in the month before suicide.
 - Less than half of older people with dementia are diagnosed.
 - Even when older people are offered support, it is frequently drug therapy, without adequate consideration of other suitable interventions.
3. Depression is the commonest mental disorder in old age and WHO confirm it is the second highest global cause of health burden.
 - Older people have the highest suicide rate for women and 2nd highest for men (National Confidential Inquiry into Suicides and Homicides). Contrary to the position with young people self harm in older people usually signifies mental illness, mostly depression, with high risk of completed suicide.
 - Depression is strongly associated with physical illness and disability, and even in this situation, responds to treatment (Cochrane reviews).
 - Most older people do not receive treatment.
4. At least 40% of older people in care homes have depression and 50-80% have dementia.
5. Only 2% of primary care practice nurses have received any mental health training. Fewer than half of GPs (survey 2000/2) felt sufficiently trained to help them diagnose and manage dementia. Only 12% of home care workers who care for a person with dementia have received training in dementia in the previous three years.
6. Each year workers aged 50 and over contribute £230 billion to national economic output (25% of the total UK economy); Older people's unpaid contributions as volunteers, carers and grandparents are valued at £24.2 billion; As consumers older people boost the economy by an additional £239 billion.

7. Social care spends 60% of its resources on people aged 65 and over; cost of services for older people with mental health problems is consistently higher; only half of those who need care actually receive it; social care is increasingly provided only in times of crisis for high levels of need.

8. In cost of illness studies
 - Dementia is the single most expensive condition to the nation and is a condition of later life. The greatest risk is with the older old, the population increasing at the greatest rate.
 - Indeed the direct costs of Alzheimer's disease alone exceed the total combined cost of stroke, cancer and heart disease.
 - In 2003/4 the NHS spent around 43% of its hospital and community health services budget (£16.471 billion) on people aged over 65. In the same year social services spent nearly 44% of its £7.38 billion budget on people aged over 65.

9. A typical district general hospital with 500 beds will admit 5000 older people each year and 3000 will suffer a mental disorder. On average, older people will occupy 330 of these beds at any time and 220 of these will have a mental disorder.
 - This means that the acute hospital will have at least four times as many older people with mental disorder on its wards as the older people's mental health service has on theirs.
 - Three disorders; depression, dementia and delirium, account for 80% of this mental disorder co-morbidity

10. Very few older people have access to specialist mental health care
 - Only 6% of those with depression receive specialist mental health care.
 - Despite the National Service Framework for Mental Health claiming it applied to all adult ages, commissioning has been targeted on new services for Early Psychosis, Assertive Outreach and Crisis Resolution Home Treatment teams which excluded older people
 - For example, 70% of Crisis Resolution Home Treatment teams in England exclude older people with only 7 (8.8%) specifically for older people (International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 2007).
 - The 2005/06 National Survey of Investment in Mental Health Services estimated a £1.65 Billion cash increase for adult mental health over a 4 year period that excluded older people.
 - Older people have been denied a share of this investment and equivalent services. This is direct age discrimination.

 - ***“The main thing is love. Food, shelter and warmth are important but it's lack of someone caring that leads to despair.”***

 - ***“Believe in yourself. Have dignity. Self-love and self-respect. Hold your head up high. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Stay young and fit. Don't think you have to act your age. Grow old disgracefully.”***

 - ***“My mother had Alzheimer's and I loved her dearly and I cared for her. When she had to be taken into care I was devastated. After she died four***

years ago I tried everything to get a job short of begging. No dice. They didn't want to know. There is still age intolerance. This has to change... Now the whole day is a struggle. I read. I walk. I take part in a church choir. But I am depressed. I am a 76-year-old lonely woman with nothing constructive to do!"

- ***"I need someone to talk to as I cannot talk to my husband [who has dementia] – I have lost my friend."***
- ***"One of the main reasons that I do so well is that I know I have my family behind me... I know that if anything should happen, if I was frightened or something, that all I would have to do is call."***

Stigma + ageism = invisibility: These facts and comments should generate a sense of urgency and of anger about the lack of attention paid to mental health problems in later life. Why is there still **a resounding silence?**

Some resources on this subject.

- [Improving Services and Support for Older People with Mental Health Problems](#)
- <http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/practiceguides/practiceguide02/index.asp>
- <http://www.olderpeoplesmentalhealth.csip.org.uk/news-and-events.html>
- <http://www.olderpeoplesmentalhealth.csip.org.uk/everybodys-business/download-documents.html>
- <http://www.olderpeoplesmentalhealth.csip.org.uk/lets-respect.html>
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