

Assessing and Maintaining Mental Health in Elderly Individuals

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KEYWORDS

• Elderly individuals • Mental health • Assessment

Mental health and mental illness issues are as common later in life as they are at other ages. However, elderly adults are less likely to receive treatment for mental health issues and mental illness difficulties.¹ Depression and anxiety in older adults are frequently misinterpreted as a normal part of aging,² and assessment and treatment are not provided for older adults. The prevalence of delirium in hospitalized older adults ranges from 4% to 53.3%.³ The syndrome of dementia includes many disorders such as Alzheimer disease, vascular dementia, Lewy body disease, and dementia resulting from head trauma.⁴ An estimated 5.1 million people aged 65 years and older have Alzheimer disease.⁵ Psychosis in the older adult may be caused from a diagnosis of schizophrenia, major depression, delirium, or substance abuse.⁶ Psychosocial issues including abuse and neglect as well as substance abuse are a major concern for older adults. This article provides an overview of the mental health issues facing older adults. The mental health characteristics and the predominant mental illnesses in older adults are presented. Prevention, health promotion, assessment of mental health status, interventions, and resources for general nurses are discussed.

OVERVIEW OF MENTAL ILLNESSES AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES IN OLDER ADULTS

In the United States, about 3% of older adults experienced serious psychological stress in the past 30 days, and nearly 4% report serious psychological distress. Women are more likely to report symptoms of serious psychological distress.⁷ The first United States Surgeon General Report on the global burden of disease⁸ emphasizes that mental health and mental illness are critical concerns of individuals at all ages. Despite increased knowledge about the neuroscience of mental health, and improved treatments, key disparities persist for certain races and cultures, various ages, and between the genders. This report is a call to action for health providers

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Nurs Clin N Am 45 (2010) 635–650

doi:10.1016/j.cnur.2010.06.010

0029-6465/10/\$ – see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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and all Americans to educate ourselves and others about mental health and mental illness and to eradicate the stigma and misunderstanding about mental illness. Nurses and all health care providers must increase their awareness and knowledge about mental health promotion and the specific illnesses and psychosocial issues facing older adults.

HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN OLDER ADULTS

Overall health promotion is important to the healthy functioning of the older adult. Specifically, health promotion involves immunizations, screenings, and counseling for health promotion behaviors.⁹ The goal of health promotion is to maximize function and well-being in older adults.¹⁰ Interventions that optimize mental health are crucial to maximize overall well-being and quality of life in the older adult. According to the United States Surgeon General's Report on Mental Illness,⁸ there are many ways to prevent or reduce the risk of developing or exacerbating mental disorders. Primary prevention involves prevention of depression and suicide, excess disability, and unnecessary institutionalization. Most efforts are focused on prevention of depression and suicide in the older adult. Other avenues to promote mental health involve activities to increase long-term and short-term memory and interventions to preserve cognitive function with age.^{11,12} A strategic plan to promote mental health and minimize disability from mental disorders, such as promotion of cognitive and emotional health and elimination of barriers to health promotion for older adults, including health disparities, is described in *Health indicators for healthy people 2010: mental health and mental disorders*.¹³ The guide to clinical preventive services¹⁴ includes quality improvement of programs to address mental health conditions and substance abuse issues; screening for dementia, depression, and suicidal risk; and screening for illicit and over-the-counter drug abuse.

Nurses and other health care providers should be knowledgeable about basic and specific screening strategies to prevent or reduce illness and promote well-being and mental health in older adults.¹⁴ First, screening for mental health conditions and substance abuse in older adults can identify the need for behavioral counseling to reduce alcohol, illicit drug, or polypharmacy abuse. Second, the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) is used to screen for dementia. A modified and updated version of the MMSE has been developed.¹⁵ The MMSE is a widely used short instrument to quickly assess for cognitive impairment and its severity. Monitoring changes over time is also possible using the MMSE.^{16–18} Third, nurses and health care providers must screen for depression and suicide risk. Because depression is common and often undetected and undiagnosed, screening to assess and institute proper treatment is essential to the well-being of the older adult. Depression assessment is described in detail later.

MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT

Health care providers must have knowledge to conduct a comprehensive mental health assessment in older adults. There are multiple tools for screening various aspects of functioning such as physical performance, psychological functioning, affective, social, and psychosocial abilities. Comprehensive assessment can be conducted using the Fulmer SPICES assessment tool, which aids the health care provider to assess sleep disorders, problems with eating or feeding, incontinence, confusion, evidence of falls, and skin breakdown.¹⁹ The General Assessment Series²⁰ *Try This: Best Practices in Nursing Care to Older Adults* includes 27 tools to assess a variety of conditions and situations in older adults. Examples of the tools are given in

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