

## Older American's Mental Health Week

**O**lder Americans' Mental Health Week is a new, annual public health observance during the last full week of May, which is both Mental Health Month and Older Americans Month. The 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. Older American's Mental Health Week is sponsored by OWL, the Older Women's League. Partners include organizations from the aging, mental health, and medical fields.

### The Need for Education

Recent public opinion polls show that a majority of the public thinks that mental health problems are a normal part of aging. "I'd be depressed too," is a common refrain. But depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are not a normal part of aging, and there is no reason that people who are aging cannot continue to grow, thrive, and enjoy their "golden years."

Older Americans, family members, caregivers, neighbors, and friends need to know that mental illnesses among the elderly are real, common, and treatable. They need to know the difference between healthy grieving over losses and unhealthy depression, between normal worries and anxiety disorders, and between normal drinking and abuse of alcohol and medications to quell emotional pain.

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.

### Program Messages

- Mental illness is not a normal part of aging.
- Regardless of age, mental illnesses are real, common, and treatable.
- Americans should enjoy their golden years. Mentally healthy adults continue to learn, grow, thrive, enjoy life, and contribute to society.
- The more people know about mental health and aging, the more they can help themselves and others.

### Facts about Older Americans and Mental Health

One-in-five older Americans has a diagnosable mental illness, but less than one-fourth of them get any type of mental health attention, let alone appropriate treatment. Undiagnosed and untreated mental illness has serious implications for older adults and their loved ones, particularly women, who live longer than men and are often still family caregivers.

Research shows that older people seeking health care for common medical problems have more visits to primary care physicians, use more medications, and are

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## FACT SHEET

### *Mental Health Week...cont'd.*

more likely to have emergency room or hospital admissions when their medical problem is accompanied by depression or another mental health problem. In addition, outcomes of medical treatment 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.

In addition to poorer health outcomes and increased costs, the consequences of untreated psychiatric disorders in older people include diminished functioning, poor quality of life, and increased mortality. Older persons have the highest suicide rate of any age group, despite the fact that over half of older persons who commit suicide visited a physician in the prior month.

- 20 percent of Americans—young and old and in-between—have a diagnosable mental disorder during a one year period (NIMH).
- The highest rate of suicide for any age group (19.4 per 100,000) is among people age 85 and older. (American Association of Suicidology, 2002)
- The second highest rate of suicide (17.7 per 100,000) is among those between age 75 and 84. (AAS)
- Men commit 83 percent of suicides by people over age 65. (CDC, 2001)

- Asian American women have the highest suicide rate among women over age 65. (CDC, 2001)
- About 11 percent of adults over age 55 have an anxiety disorder. (USSG 1999)
- While 4.4 percent of older adults have a diagnosable mood disorder such as depression, up to 20 percent have significant symptoms of depression. (USSG 1999)
- Older adults enrolled in Medicare must pay 50 percent of outpatient mental health treatment costs, but they pay only 20 percent of costs associated with physical health services.
- Treatment works. Treatments may include medications, psychotherapy, or both.

*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, support the efforts of OWL to raise awareness about this very important issue. For more information on Older Americans 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) or e-mail [owlinfo@owl-national.org](mailto:owlinfo@owl-national.org).*

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging (AoA), works with a nationwide network of organizations and service providers to make support services and resources available to older persons and their caregivers. For more information about the AoA, please contact: **the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging**, Washington, DC 20201, Phone 202-619-0724, e-mail [aoainfo@aoa.gov](mailto:aoainfo@aoa.gov), Web site: [www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov)

