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MENTAL HEALTH AND OLDER PEOPLE



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Mental Health of Older Adults, Addressing, A GROWING CONCERN

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The world population has never been as mature as now. Currently, the number of people aged 60 and over is more than 800 million. Projections indicate that this figure will increase to over two billion in 2050. People aged 60 can now expect to survive an additional 18.5 to 21.6 years. Soon the world will have a higher number of older adults than children. Contrary to common sense perceptions, the majority of older people live in low- and middle-income countries and some of the fastest rates of ageing are occurring in these areas.

The United Nations uses the benchmark of 60 years of age or above to refer to older people (UNFPA, 2012). However, in many high-income countries, the age of 65 is used as a reference point for older persons as this is often the age at which persons become eligible for old-age social security benefits. This higher age category is less appropriate to the situation in developing countries including Africa where life expectancy is often lower than that in high-income countries.

Underlying factors of mental health problems in older adults

A multitude of social, demographic, psychological, and biological factors contribute to a person's mental health status. Almost all these factors are particularly pertinent amongst older adults.

Factors such as poverty, social isolation, loss of independence, loneliness and losses of different kinds, can affect mental health and general health. Older adults are more likely to experience events such as bereavements or physical disability that affect emotional well-being and can result in poorer mental health. They may also be exposed to maltreatment at home and in care institutions. On the other hand, social support and family interactions can boost the dignity of older adults, and are likely to have a protective role in the mental health outcomes of this population.

There are more older women worldwide than older men. This difference increases with advancing age and has been called "feminization of ageing". Older men and women have different health and morbidity patterns and women generally have lower income but better family support networks. On the other hand both depression and Alzheimer's disease are more prevalent among women.

An important risk factor to the health and mental health of older adults, and an important human rights issue, is elder maltreatment. WHO defines elder maltreatment as "a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust that causes harm or distress to an older person". This type of abuse includes; physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and self-respect. In high-income countries where data exists, around 4-6% of older persons have experienced some form of maltreatment at home.

Promotion of mental health within a healthy ageing framework

Mental health of older adults can be improved through promoting active and healthy ageing. To promote healthy ageing, the socio-economic determinants and inequalities in health need to be dealt with and additional gender and minority disparities need to be tackled. Stereotypes against active ageing are called "ageism" and need to be reversed. Ageist attitudes

consider older adults as frail, "past their sell-by date", unable to work, physically weak, mentally slow, disabled or helpless. Ageism serves as a social divider between young and old and prevents participation in society.

Promoting healthy life styles among the general population, starting from an earlier age with strategies such as increasing physical and mental activity, avoiding smoking, preventing harmful use of alcohol and providing early identification and treatment of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) can contribute to better mental health among older adults.

Physical health problems in older adults

Even in resource-poor countries, more older people die of NCDs such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes than from infectious and parasitic diseases. In addition, older people often have several concurrent health problems. Risk factors for degenerative brain disease such as high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol levels are increasing among older adults.

Mental health has a big impact on physical health. For example, coexisting depression in people with diabetes is associated with decreased adherence to treatment, poor metabolic control, higher complication rates, decreased quality of life, increased healthcare use and cost, increased disability and lost productivity and increased risk of death.

Mental disorders in older adults

Dementia

Dementia is a syndrome involving deterioration in memory, thinking, behaviour and the ability to perform everyday activities such as dressing, eating, personal hygiene and toilet activities. It generally affects older people, although it is not a normal part of ageing. A report by WHO and the Alzheimer Disease Association International (ADI) in 2012 suggests a crude estimated prevalence of 4.7% among people 60 years and over. This indicates that 35.6 million people are living with dementia.

Depression

Depression is common in old age. According to the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) 2010 data, the Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) for depression (major depressive disorder plus dysthymia) over 60 is 9.17 million years or 1.6% of total DALYs in this age group.

Other mental disorders

Though substance abuse problems are thought of as young people's problems, they should not be neglected in older adults. Substance abuse problems among the elderly are often overlooked or misdiagnosed. In Europe, the number of older adults with such problems will double from 2001 to 2020.

Prescribing for older adults is common. Some prescribed medicines such as benzodiazepines and opioids have a potential for abuse or dependence and this may occur within or outside a medical context.

Treatment of substance use disorders in older adults is at least as effective as in younger adults. Treatment of health conditions due to substance use, especially management of withdrawal states or substance-induced psychoses, should be delivered in a supportive and, if necessary, medical environment, with proper consideration given to interactions between psychoactive substances and prescribed medicines as well as to other health complications. The world population has never been as mature as

Conclusion

The number of older adults is growing fast all over the world. The socioeconomic impact of such demographic changes is adding to overall mental health consequences.

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Mental Health and Wellbeing of Older People

Mental Health in Older People : a Public Health Issue

The World Health Organization definition of health is “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. This means that mental health is essential to overall health and wellbeing and should be recognized in all older persons with the same importance as physical health.

More than 20% of people age 55 years or older may have some type of mental health problem. Biological changes may interfere with the brain's functioning. Social changes can lead to isolation or feelings of worthlessness. Somatic diseases are often important contributory factors too. Mental disorders may exacerbate the symptoms and functional disabilities associated with medical illnesses and increase the use of healthcare resources, length of hospital stay and overall cost of care.

Mental health problems can have a high impact on an older person's ability to carry out the basic activities of daily living, reducing their independence, autonomy, and quality of life. The first step to reduce these negative consequences is simply making a diagnosis.

Today's older adult population is unlikely to acknowledge mental illness or access mental health services. Many stigmas exist regarding the meaning of mental illness. Some older people view mental illness as a sign of weakness and are unlikely to admit to problems, especially when they fear loss of independence. Too many persons consider that symptoms of dementia and depression are a normal part of ageing. Many elders lack availability of services or access to them.

Mental Health Problems in Older Adults

Dementia

Dementia describes a group of related symptoms, where there is ongoing decline of the brain and its abilities. Between 2% and 10% of all dementia cases start before the age of 65. The prevalence doubles with every five-year increment after age 65.

Dementia is the leading cause of dependency and disability among older persons. The estimated worldwide cost of dementia is estimated to have been \$604 billion USD in 2010, with direct medical care costs only contributing to 16% of the global cost. Dementia profoundly affects the quality of life of people with dementia and their caregivers.

There are more than 100 different diseases causing dementia. Alzheimer's disease probably accounts for over 50 percent of cases of dementia. Vascular dementia is also very common. Other types of dementia include Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia and Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome as a result of alcohol abuse.

Depression in the elderly

Depression is the most prevalent mental health problem among

older adults. It is associated with distress and suffering and can lead to impairments in physical, mental and social functioning. The presence of depressive disorders often affects the course and complicates the treatment of other chronic diseases. Older adults with depression visit the doctor and emergency room more often, use more medication, incur higher outpatient charges and stay longer in the hospital.

In the majority of cases depression in older persons is a treatable condition. As with younger people, treatment consists of a combination of antidepressant drugs and supportive counselling or other forms of psychotherapy. It is also important to rule out physical causes of depression and avoid other treatments able to cause depression.

Anxiety in the elderly

Anxiety, panic and phobias disrupt the lives of 10% of older persons. Fear is a normal emotion, but sometimes it gets out of control and interferes with the ability to do even simple things. Anxiety is also often a sign of depression in older people and can amplify the physical symptoms related to low mood. Cognitive behavioural therapy and drug treatments, including some which work on both anxiety and depression, can also be useful.

Mental Health and Wellbeing in Older Persons : The Way Forward

Ageing well in physical and mental health is a right of all persons. Such rights extend to enjoying active and satisfying social lives, participation, having equitable access to good quality health care and social systems and providing adequate support to caregivers.

The ageing shift will have profound consequences for the workforce, healthcare systems, informal and formal caregiver capacity and society. It will require more and better strategies to ensure good mental health and wellbeing in the growing older population.

Interventions to prevent social isolation and loneliness are effective measures. An increase in social inclusion and participation of older people must be a very high priority in order to promote active ageing and quality of life in a holistic way by addressing :

- Life-long learning, training and education of older people
- Psychological and behavioural determinants of health
- Socio-economic determinants of health
- Taking cultural and spiritual needs into account.

Mental health promotion research related to older people should be strengthened in order to improve scientific evidence and should concentrate on issues where the evidence base is weakest. The promotion of an appropriate use of medication is crucial for optimal mental health and functioning among older people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the promotion of healthy ageing in all its aspects is an important role for all societies. Early recognition, diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders that are common in old age are important to prevent avoidable suffering and disabilities.

Care for older adults with mental illness requires sensitivity and

observational and relational skills in order to help the older person achieve and maintain the highest possible level of function and wellbeing. Those who care for older persons should always be protected and supported in their tasks everywhere.

All these actions together can certainly contribute to better mental health in old age.

Time to Act

World Mental Health Day 2013 is specifically focused on the elderly, and rightly so. With the improvements in science, technology, social care and environments, more people are living longer and the trend towards an ever-older population is universal. In 2011, life expectancy had already exceeded 75 years in 57 countries of the world and by 2017 the elderly population worldwide, defined as those aged 65 years and over, is predicted to outnumber that of children under 5 years.

This change in life expectancy, although welcome, brings its own specific challenges; these include the management of frailty, the prevention of social isolation and loneliness and the management of comorbidity. Thousands of times each day physicians encounter older adults with interacting medical, psychological and social problems and this complexity can sometimes be overwhelming.

Frailty

We know frailty is related to age, is highly prevalent in the elderly and contributes to poorer health outcomes, falls, mortality and hospitalization. Health professionals can screen for frailty by identifying shrinking, in the form of unintentional weight loss and loss of muscle mass, weakness, poor endurance, exhaustion, slowness and low activity.

- *Elderly individuals should be screened for frailty so that it can be recognized early.*
- *The elderly should be encouraged to participate in dynamic exercises.*
- *Family doctors/general practitioners should have access to community resources that promote exercise.*

Multimorbidity

It is a cause for celebration that an increasing number of people reach the age of 65 years every day (9,10); however, multimorbidity is strongly associated with increasing age and we need to rise to this challenge.

- *Multimorbidity affects more than half of the elderly population.*
- *Multimorbidity increases with age and with deprivation.*
- *Increasing multimorbidity is associated with poorer quality of life.*
- *All professionals, families and careers need to be able to recognize multimorbidity, so that holistic health and social care can contribute to improving quality of life in the elderly.*

Community and social capital and the elderly

Old age is often portrayed as a period of increased social stress, social isolation, frailty, comorbidity and poverty. It can also be a period in an individual's life associated with giving support to

others and volunteering for the community. This contributes to community and social capital.

- *Encouraging older adults to participate in volunteering will increase social and community capital.*
- *Organizations should explore ways to develop a global social and community capital bank.*

Integrated management

We already know that an increasing proportion of the population will live to old age, especially in low and medium-income countries. A transition towards an older society that took more than a century to achieve in Europe is now taking place in less than 25 years in countries like Brazil, China and Thailand.

According to the 1997 World Health Organization/World Psychiatric Association consensus statement, good quality care for older people should be :

- ☐ comprehensive
- ☐ accessible
- ☐ responsive
- ☐ individualized
- *Complexity and multimorbidity in older adults should be managed in a holistic way.*
- *Holistic care in older adults is best achieved through an integrated approach, supported by appropriate policies and protocols.*
- *Primary care has a role in coordinating interventions to achieve desirable health outcomes for the individual.*

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Keeping Mentally Fit

Good health includes both physical and mental wellbeing. And the two go hand in hand. A healthy mind contributes to a healthy body. The mind, like the body, benefits from low blood pressure, low cholesterol, nourishing food, a healthy weight and physical activity.

There are many healthy lifestyle choices we can make to keep our bodies healthy and avoid illness and disability. There are additional steps we can take to help preserve healthy minds.

What changes in mental abilities can we expect as we age ? What's normal ?

As we age, we can expect certain changes in our bodies and minds. We may not see and hear as well as we did in our 20s. We may not be able to remember recent events or details as well or as quickly as we did in our 30s. Beginning in our 30s, the brain's weight, the network of nerves and its blood flow begin to decrease. Our brains adapt, however and grow new patterns of nerve endings.

While certain changes in our mental abilities are inevitable as we age, much remains the same. We retain our intellect. Our ability to change and be flexible remains. Old dogs can learn new tricks. We just might need a little more time. We keep our ability to grow intellectually and emotionally.

What can I do to keep my mind healthy ?

For the last several years, new research has emerged that shows there are many things we can do to keep our minds healthy. Many of the same things we do to keep our bodies healthy contribute to healthy minds. Physical activity and a diet that helps lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure also help to keep our minds healthy by allowing our bodies to deliver oxygen-rich blood to our brains. In addition, activities that stimulate our minds, like crossword puzzles, reading, writing, and learning new things, help to keep our brains healthy. Staying engaged with the people around us and our communities plays an equally big part in staying mentally fit.

Following are some specific recommendations to keep a healthy mind and ward off mental health problems.

- ❑ **Be physically active :** The benefits are numerous. Being physically active helps prevent bone density loss, maintain balance and ward off illnesses (like heart disease, stroke and some cancers). For some, illness and disability can bring on or contribute to mental illness. For example, those who live with diabetes, cancer and heart disease can also suffer from depression.
- ❑ **Keep blood pressure down :** Blood pressure below 120/80 mmHg is considered healthy and helps reduce the risk of stroke, which is tied to dementia including Alzheimer's disease. High blood pressure damages blood vessels, which increases one's risk of stroke, kidney failure, heart disease and heart attack. Nearly two-thirds of adults over age 65 have high blood pressure, 140/90 mmHg or higher. Those with blood pressure between 120/80 mmHg and 139/89 mmHg are considered to have prehypertension, which means that while the blood pressure is not too high, they are likely to develop it in the future. To reduce or keep blood pressure at a healthy level, keep your weight down, don't smoke, exercise

regularly, eat a healthy diet and limit salt, alcohol and caffeine.

- ❑ **Keep your cholesterol levels low :** High blood cholesterol is a risk factor for heart disease as well as dementia. The higher your blood cholesterol level, the greater your chance of disease and illness. An excess of cholesterol (a fat-like substance) in your blood can build up on the walls of your arteries. This causes them to harden and narrow, which slows down and can block blood flow. A blood cholesterol level of less than 200 mg/dL is considered healthy, 200-239 mg/dL is borderline high and 240 mg/dL and above is high. Heredity, age and gender can affect cholesterol levels. Cholesterol rises with age and women's levels tend to rise beginning after menopause. Healthy changes to diet, weight and physical activity can help improve blood cholesterol levels.
 - ❑ **Eat your vegetables and more :** We've heard it all our lives, the good advice to eat our vegetables. The same diet that can help us stay strong and healthy provides the nutrition necessary for a healthy brain. It starts with a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat dairy products. Experiment and find out how you best like to eat the good things that your entire body needs. There's an endless variety to suit every taste. Some specific dietary recommendations for a healthy brain:
 - ❑ **Monitor your medication use :** Be sure to read labels and carefully follow your physician's instructions. Some medications come with certain precautions such as avoiding alcohol or not combining with other medications, even over-the-counter drugs and herbal remedies. Some memory loss, some forms of dementia, and other problems of the brain can be traced back to harmful drug combinations or inappropriate drug use.
 - ❑ **Drink moderately :** If you don't drink, don't start. If you do drink, limit yourself to no more than one drink a day if you are over the age of 65 and do not have a drinking problem. One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits, or 5 ounces of wine.
 - ❑ **Give up smoking :** If you are a smoker, don't wait until you are debilitated by a serious disease before considering quitting. Smoking significantly increases one's chance of having a stroke and developing lung and other cancers, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), heart attacks and peripheral vascular disease.
- According to the American Lung Association, when an older person quits smoking, circulation improves immediately and lungs begin to heal. After one year, the additional risk of heart disease caused by smoking is cut almost in half and the risk of stroke, lung disease, and cancer decreases.
- ❑ **Maintain a healthy weight :** People who are obese or overweight are at increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis-related disabilities and some cancers. The health risks of being overweight include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease and stroke. Being underweight also carries risks including poor memory and decreased immunity.

Ask your health care provider how much you should weigh and for suggestions on reaching that weight. Whatever your weight, a healthy diet and regular exercise will only improve your overall health.

- ❑ **Take care of your teeth by brushing and flossing and seeing your dentist regularly :** Recent studies have linked chronic inflammation caused by gum disease to a number of health problems, including Alzheimer's disease and heart disease. So, take care of your teeth not only to maintain a dazzling smile and the ability to chew your favorite foods but also to ward off disease.
- ❑ **Keep mentally fit :** Just as we exercise our bodies to keep them in working order, so must we exercise our brains to stay mentally agile and adept. It's the use-it-or-lose-it theory. By engaging in mentally stimulating activities, we can maintain our brain functions as we age. We can continue to grow new connections among the billions of brain cells we possess by learning new things. This activity may help to ward off dementia like Alzheimer's disease. So, work out your brain daily. Stimulate new areas of your brain and grow more connections among brain cells by intellectually challenging yourself. Solve a puzzle, learn a new musical instrument, read a challenging book, play a board or card game, attend a lecture or play or write a short story.
- ❑ **Reduce stress :** Just as stress can wear our bodies down and increase blood pressure and the risk of heart disease, it can also affect the way we think, our moods and ability to remember. In fact, the hormones our bodies release when we are under stress may shrink the brain, affecting memory and learning. Stress can also cause or contribute to depression and anxiety.
- ❑ **Protect your brain :** A history of head injury or loss of consciousness can affect the health of your brain. Falls are the leading cause of brain injury in the elderly, according to the Brain Injury Association of America. Take steps to protect your head and the precious matter inside.
- ❑ **Stay socially connected :** The support we receive from our friends, family and colleagues helps maintain our mental health. Studies have shown that those who are engaged with family and community groups take longer to show the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease than those who are socially isolated. So stay or become connected. Join a book club or a volunteer group and interact with the world around you.

Warning Signs

The following are not normal characteristics of ageing and can indicate an illness. Discuss these symptoms with your physician.

- ❑ Depressed mood or sadness lasting longer than two weeks
- ❑ Unexplained crying spells
- ❑ Loss of interest or pleasure in the things and people that were previously enjoyable
- ❑ Jumpiness or tiredness, lethargy, fatigue or loss of energy
- ❑ Irritability, quarrelsomeness
- ❑ Loss or increase in appetite or weight change
- ❑ Sleep change such as insomnia (not being able to sleep) or

sleeping more than usual

- ❑ Feelings of worthlessness, inappropriate guilt, hopelessness, helplessness
- ❑ Decreased ability to think, concentrate or make decisions
- ❑ Repeated thoughts of death or suicide, suicide attempts-Seek help from a medical professional immediately.
- ❑ Aches and pains, constipation or other physical problems that cannot otherwise be explained
- ❑ Confusion and disorientation
- ❑ Memory loss, loss of recent, short-term memory
- ❑ Social withdrawal
- ❑ Trouble handling finances, working with numbers, paying the bills
- ❑ Change in appearance, standard of dress
- ❑ Problems maintaining the home, the yard

What might trigger or contribute to mental illness ?

- ❑ Physical disability
- ❑ Physical illness
 - With diseases of the heart and lungs, the brain may not get enough oxygen, which affects mental ability and behaviour.
 - Diseases of the adrenal, thyroid, pituitary or other glands can affect emotions, perceptions, memory and thought processes
- ❑ A change in environment such as moving into a new home
- ❑ Loss or illness of a loved one
- ❑ A combination of medications
 - On average, older adults take more medications than others. Because our metabolism slows down as we age, drugs can remain longer in an older person and reach toxic levels more quickly
- ❑ Drug-alcohol interactions can cause confusion, mood changes, symptoms of dementia
- ❑ Alcohol or drug abuse and misuse
- ❑ Poor diet
 - Dental problems can contribute to a poor diet. Some older adults may avoid foods that are difficult to chew.

If I suspect a problem, what should I do ?

- ❑ Talk with your physician. Explain how you feel and describe what is not normal for you. Have a list of all medications, and vitamin, mineral and herbal supplements.
- ❑ Talk to a trusted friend, family member or spiritual advisor.

Conclusion

The Geriatric Mental Health Foundation was established by the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry to raise awareness of psychiatric and mental health disorders affecting the elderly, eliminate the stigma of mental illness and treatment, promote healthy ageing strategies, and increase access to quality mental health care for the elderly

Source: *Publication of World Mental Health Day, 2013*

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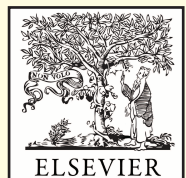
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