



FROM THE SPAMEC HEALTH CONCERNS COMMITTEE

Older Americans Month and National Mental Health Awareness Month

May is designated as Older Americans Month and National Mental Health Awareness Month. Each year, nearly 44 million adults in America experience mental health concerns ranging from anxiety and depression to post-traumatic stress and suicidal thoughts.

Depression is the most common mental health condition among seniors. Other prevalent cognitive and emotional health problems include dementia, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and social phobia. More serious diagnoses such as schizophrenia and personality disorders persistently diminish the quality of life and daily functioning for seniors. Depressed seniors or those dealing with emotional concerns neglect eating well, getting regular exercise, maintaining the home and interacting socially.

Older adults often face a number of life stressors that heighten psychological distress. Many experience chronic pain, restricted mobility, bereavement, loneliness and a loss of independence. Countless older military veterans carry post-war wounds to their psychological health. In addition, medical conditions such as diabetes and heart disease can worsen depression and other mental health disabilities. Warning signs of mental illness are not always easy to detect. The following behaviors are signals that something may be amiss with one's mental well-being:

Ongoing sadness or feeling blue

Extreme mood swings including euphoric highs

Intense worry or fear

Uncontrolled, compulsive actions such as overspending or excessive cleaning

Heightened irritability or anger

Confusion or lack of concentration

Sleep difficulties

Trouble perceiving reality such as having delusions or hallucinations

Marked changes in eating habits

Several physical illnesses without obvious causes (headaches, vague aches and pains)

Suicidal thoughts

Withdrawal from family and friends

Overuse of alcohol or drugs

Older adults may have limited access to care, may be in denial about mental challenges, or less likely than younger adults to receive treatment for them. When they do receive treatment, it's less likely that they see a mental health specialist. More often, they seek mental health treatment from their primary care providers. 63 percent of older adults with a mental disorder do not receive the services they need. Primary care physicians fail to diagnose depression 50 percent of the time. 75 percent of those who commit suicide have visited a primary care physician within a month of their suicide. Misdiagnosis and avoidance are common.

For older adults in particular, depression is often misconstrued as a normal part of the aging process and thus may go unrecognized and untreated. Only half of older adults who discuss specific mental health problems with a physician receive any treatment. Older adults have unique mental health care needs. Changing bodies and chemistry, changes in family and friendships, and changes in living situations all have an effect on mental health and need to be considered in treatment. If older adults take several medications for a variety of illnesses, drug interactions and side effects can affect mood and behavior.

Medicare covers 80 percent of a physical health problem, but only 50 percent of a mental health problem. This is a barrier to treatment for many people. Finding a provider can be difficult for older adults because providers may limit their number of patients with Medicare, due to lower reimbursement rates compared to private insurance. Psychiatrists, for example, are the most likely of any physician specialty to opt out of Medicare.

Covid-19 has contributed to increased rates of anxiety, distress and depression among older adults --- especially people of color or those of low socioeconomic status who may experience more difficulty accessing mental health care or who may face more pronounced stigma surrounding mental health issues.

Those living with mental health conditions, and their families as well, need to know they are not alone. Effective treatments are available for the majority of mental conditions --- just like people need to take medicine and get professional help for physical conditions, someone with a mental health problem may need to take medicine and/or participate in therapy in order to get better.