

Depression and older adults



Key points to remember:

- Depression in adults over 65 years can be difficult to diagnose, as the symptoms are often attributed to ageing.
- Physical health, social isolation, reduced sense of purpose and recent bereavements can increase the risk of developing depression.

In Australia, depression is a common mental health condition, and older people are more at risk of developing depression due to contributing factors such as physical illness or personal loss. Research suggests between 10 and 15 per cent of older people will experience depression. However this figure is believed to be more than double (around 35%) for people living in residential aged-care facilities.

Unfortunately depression is often more difficult to diagnose in older people due to a number of reasons. This includes different presenting symptoms compared to younger people and a tendency for older people to under-report depressive symptoms or feelings of sadness.

Many people over the age of 65 may feel ashamed or that there is a stigma attached to depression. The often view it as a weakness and do not want to talk about it.

Symptoms of depression in older adults:

- Feelings of sadness or despair
- Loss of interest in life and usual activities.
- Weight loss or loss of appetite
- Poor sleep or over-sleeping
- Chronic unexplained pain
- Lack of motivation and energy
- Difficulty concentrating or poor memory
- Slowed movement or speech
- Fixation on thoughts of death

- Behavioural changes including neglecting self-care, refusing to eat, avoidance of leaving home, giving away personal items, or a preoccupation with changing their will.

Unfortunately these symptoms are often incorrectly attributed to old age, symptoms of dementia or poor health. As a result depression in older adults can often be undetected for a long time.

Causes of depression in older adults

As we age, we often experience significant life events that can increase the risk for developing depression. These include:

Physical health problems. Chronic or severe pain, physical illness or health problems, disability, changes in cognitive functioning or damage to your body image or physical ability due to surgery or sickness can all be contributors to depression.

Loneliness and social isolation. Many people experience social isolation and loneliness as a result of living alone, a diminishing social circle due to deaths or relocation, or an inability to actively participate in the community due to decreased mobility or a loss of driving privileges.

Reduced sense of purpose.

Retirement from paid and or voluntary work can often bring with it a loss of identity, self-confidence, and financial security. Physical limitations due to ill health or physical ailments can also impact on your ability to enjoy activities that you use to and therefore impact on your sense of purpose.

Recent bereavements. With age, losses become cumulative and frequent. Whilst many people cope well with the death of their spouse or partner, friends, family members and pets. For other people, these losses can trigger the development of depressive symptoms.

Where to seek help for older people with depression

Your general practitioner (GP) is usually the best place start for anyone over the age of 65 who is experiencing symptoms of depression. They will then determine if a referral to a mental health professional is required.

Where to get more information

www.seniors.gov.au is the Australian Government's premier source of information for Australians over 50 years of age for managing depression.

The information in this document is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. This document may be downloaded without charge and distributed on condition that no changes are made.

Australian Psychology and Wellness Centre

PH: 02 66993820, www.apawc.com.au,

