

Understanding Your Cognitive, Mental & Emotional Health

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As we age, we lose certain cognitive abilities. In fact, 20 percent of people ages 55 and older have some sort of mental disorder. While some changes are expected as we grow older, including those to short-term and working memory, spatial orientation, and executive functioning (*organization, judgment, and decision making*), some are not considered a “normal” part of aging:

Severe Anxiety:

More than 10 percent of those 55 and older have a treatable anxiety disorder

Depression:

Afflicts 6 percent of Americans over the age of 65, meaning more than 2 million cases in the United States

Dementia:

10 percent of those over 65 and 50 percent of those over 85 are affected

Depression often goes undiagnosed and untreated; 40 percent of suicides have seen a doctor within one week of suicide. Other disorders or medication may worsen depression: parkinsonism, hypothyroid, cardiac disease, B-12 and folate deficiency, hypercalcemia, anemia, steroids, and beta blockers. Loved ones should keep an eye out for the mentioned symptoms and doctors should consider targeted medications.

It is important to remember that we all get anxious, we all get depressed, and we all have a degree of cognitive, emotional change. But if you or a loved one recognizes the signs of the following disorders, see your doctor right away

Mild Cognitive Impairment is considered a more intense forgetfulness.

Those who suffer from MCI often forget recent events or conversations and experience difficulty performing more than one task at a time. They also have trouble solving problems and take much longer to complete mental activities. It is important that MCI does not go undiagnosed, as many cases go on to develop Alzheimer's disease. Cognitive testing should be administered and treatment should be considered by healthcare professional.

Severe Anxiety results in much suffering, functional impairment, and social and family distress. Those who suffer from these disorders are often tense, worried or panicked and have a hard time concentrating on work, school, or other regular activities. Irrational fears and thoughts of suicide also become real risks. Treatment is available and generally effective, especially if treated early. Both medication and psychotherapy can be successful.

Depression tends to develop symptoms such as:

- Depressed mood, which, in older adults, can present as irritation, agitation, anger, or restlessness
- Diminished interest and pleasure replaced with sadness
- Significant weight gain or loss
- Sleep disturbance; fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Diminished interest and pleasure replaced with sadness
- Significant weight gain or loss
- Sleep disturbance; fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Diminished concentration or feelings of indecisiveness
- Thoughts of death and risk of suicide

Dealing with Anxiety & Depression

Consider that depression or anxiety may be present in all distressed older adults. Do not be ashamed if you suspect yourself. Those surrounding you should be aware of denial, disability, and suicidal thoughts. It is imperative that all older adults establish a support system for prevention, recognition, and treatment. Remember, anxiety and depression can be treated.

Dementia is common in mature adults but is easily confused with non-dementing memory loss. Age leads to short-term memory issues but not to significant issues of long-term memory, curiosity, engagement, emotional responsiveness or problem solving, as Dementia does. Alzheimer's disease creates helplessness and disruption of adult life.

Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia claiming 300,000 new cases each year. It is often the care takers who suffer severely; 19 million Americans have a family member with Alzheimer's disease. Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease include:

- Forgetting names, getting lost, losing things
- Inability to write, play games, or process new information
- Loss of perception
- Depression or personality change
- Loss of social skills or agitation

Dealing with Dementia

There is still no solid form of treatment for Alzheimer's, but a support system is imperative. Programs and learning should be consistent with the person's abilities. Treatment for anemia, depression, heart disease, infection, and thyroid and nutrition deficiencies should be considered, as these often are paired with the disease. Also, the care taker will need alone time and care from others, as well.

Accurate assessment and diagnosis is crucial to accurate prognosis and treatment. Effective care requires a seamless coordination of medical, psychiatric, community, and family resources. Caretakers also need care and consideration.



Cognitive, mental, and emotional disorders are often exaggerations of “normal” issues. The key is the presence or absence of significant functional, social, and emotional limitations

While increasing age means increasing vulnerability, there are things you can do to keep yourself happy and healthy:

- The preservation of your reserves, including physical, mental, and emotional health, results in prevention of illness. So to preserve your mental health, look after your physical health: Find a good geriatric doctor, eat a balanced diet, know your medications, and if you live at home make changes in your house to make it safer. **For more information, visit www.environmentalgeriatrics.com**
- Motivation for exercise and lifelong learning works best when you enjoy them, so try joining a softball league or taking dancing lessons, auditing a class at a local college or learning how to use the Internet. Remember, depression spoils motivation, but social support encourages motivation.
- Long-term gains are achieved by meeting short-term goals, so make to-do lists filled with smaller, obtainable goals that will lead to your desired results.
- Variety, beauty, surprise, and play encourage health. So get out there and enjoy all that life has to offer. Growing older does not have to be an ending; instead it can be a beautiful new beginning!

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