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Indicators of mental health in later life: A major public health issue

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Background: Mental health is essential to overall health and must be recognized and treated at all ages, including later life. Older people are currently the fastest growing age group yet have the most widely under-recognized mental health conditions which result in either lack of treatment or under-treatment. It is estimated that 20% of people age 55 years or older experience some type of mental health concern. Most commonly experienced conditions include anxiety, cognitive impairment and mood disorders. Mental health issues are often implicated as a factor in cases of suicide, especially men over the age of 80 (45 per 100,000, compared to the overall rate of 11 per 100,000 for all ages).

Method: Data on the mental health of older adults are collected through the United States Center for Disease Control, through random, digit-dialed telephone surveys, of non-institutionalized Americans aged 50 years or older, using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. This questionnaire consists of core questions asked to all subjects, as well as supplemental modules which a series of questions on specific topics.

Result: Reported data indicates that there are significant mental health issues reported among older adults, grouped into the following areas of assessment: Social and emotional support, life satisfaction, frequent mental distress, current and lifetime depression and current and lifetime anxiety disorders. Incorporated into these results are the public health uses of this information to identify populations that might be most risk and to monitor the need for and the effectiveness of various public health interventions.

Conclusion: Continuous mental health surveillance should be used to develop public health programs. These agencies can incorporate mental health promotion into disease prevention efforts, conduct surveillance and research to improve the mental health evidence base and collaborate with partners to enhance coordination of care for older adults.

Biography

Lynn Tepper's research focuses on the behavioral aspects of health promotion and disease prevention, with emphasis on anxiety-related medical and dental interventions, tobacco use, the application of theoretical models of health behaviors, and healthy aging. With more than 30 professional papers, book chapters, and textbooks, important products of her research have been the development of multidisciplinary health behavior assessment instruments, in both English and Spanish, for people with behavioral concerns related to the maintenance of health and the prevention of disease, as well as the testing of interventional protocols, which have been proven successful with older patients. Dr. Tepper is the primary investigator for three NIH-funded projects, and two U.S. Department of Education grants. In addition to her Columbia responsibilities, she officiates on community board committees related to long term care and the aging population.

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