

Bittersweet milestones: Depression in adults 100 years old and over is poorly understood

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For many of the elderly, the golden years are anything but. Faced with health problems, financial issues and the death of a spouse or loved one, many adults 65 years and older suffer from depression. While research is emerging to help this group understand and treat the problem, another group - centenarians - has been left largely in the dark.

"Centenarians are still rare, and depression hasn't been studied thoroughly in this group," said Adam Davey, a developmental psychologist in the College of Health Professions at Temple University. "We've found that it's a very under diagnosed condition among people over 100 years old, yet it's one of the most easily treated forms of mental illness."

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, more than 60,000 people in the U.S. are 100 years old or over, and as baby boomers start to hit their 100-year mark, that number is expected to more than quadruple to 274,000. As a result of this new boom, a group of researchers have been studying this group more and more to learn about successful late-life aging.

In a study presented at the Gerontological Society of America's annual meeting on Nov. 24, lead author Davey and colleagues from institutions across the country looked at indicators of depression among respondents enrolled in the Georgia Centenarian Study, a three-phased project to study quality of life for those over age 100.

Based on responses given in the survey by a sample of 244 centenarians, researchers found that more than 25 percent showed clinically relevant levels of depressive symptoms, yet only 8 percent reported having a current diagnosis of depression.

Davey notes that further study will need to pinpoint the reason for these high levels, but his research suggests a number of factors, including poor nutritional status, urinary incontinence, limited physical activity and past history of anxiety.

"People who suffer from depression tend to have a high risk of mortality, so it's puzzling to see higher numbers among the oldest old," he said.

In an earlier phase of the Georgia Centenarian Study, researchers found that centenarians living in a community setting were found to have higher levels of depression than their younger counterparts. Davey noted that since caregivers play a large role in the lives of many centenarians, it is important for doctors, nurses and even family members to focus on the larger picture to ensure a better quality of life.

"Caregivers often focus on the physical part of health," he said. "Or, when they look at they mental health of older adults, they focus more on dementia. But depression is important to consider too – it's not just something that younger people suffer from."

Source: Temple University

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