

Elderly depression lessened when relatives keep them informed on family matters

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The elderly are less likely to feel depressed if their relatives keep them updated about important family matters, a new study indicates.

Researchers at the University of Michigan and Kyungpook National University looked at how stress and depression affected elders over age 85. Changes in positive life events—such as a new baby in the family, a personal achievement by a relative, or improvement in a family member's health—were significantly associated with changes in depression.

"It is important to examine the issues of stress and depression among elders over the age of 85 as they are the fastest growing age group," said Ruth Dunkle, a U-M professor of social work. "Understanding [mental health](#) issues among the very old, allows us to design services targeted to help this specific age group."

Elders aged 85 and older are more vulnerable to stress and depression than any other [age groups](#), as they lose relationships with family and friends.

The new study used responses from 193 elderly people living in the Midwest. Interviews were conducted in four sessions, starting in 1986. They rated their depression, daily hassles, positive and negative life events, and psychosocial resources.

Examples of negative life events include hearing loss, death of a friend,

relative or pet, major illness or loss of favorite object. These [life events](#), however, were not significantly associated with depression.

The study also included responses regarding the participants' feelings about daily hassles, such as declining health, forgetting things, too much time on hands, not enough energy and inner conflict.

"Ongoing daily hassles are persistent annoyances that could have cumulative effects leading to an increase in depressive symptoms," said Dunkle, co-director of the National Institute of Aging (NIA) training program in Social Research on Applied Issues of Aging and the Geriatric Fellowship Program.

Among these very old people, these researchers found that issues of stress and depression vary over time. Many elders who displayed faster increase in a sense of command—or mastery—resulted in slower increase in [depression](#) than those with a slower increase in sense of mastery.

The authors noted several limitations to their findings, including the respondents did not live in institutional or assisted living communities. People who live in the community are more likely to function better than their institutional counterparts.

Dunkle conducted the study with lead author Hae-Sook Jeon, a lecturer in the Department of Social Welfare at Kyungpook National University.

The findings appear in *Research on Aging*.

Provided by University of Michigan ([news](#) : [web](#))

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