

The prevalence of mental disorders among older people is greater than previously assumed

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Previous studies have largely assumed that the prevalence of mental disorders declines with old age. The results of a new large-scale study with innovative diagnostic methods conducted in six European countries reveal that, considering the previous year retrospectively, approximately one third of the respondents in the age group between 65 and 85 had suffered from a mental disorder, and roughly one quarter were mentally ill at the time of the interviews. The results have now been published in the renowned *British Journal of Psychiatry*.

"We started with the assumption that valid diagnostic methods for adults are less suitable for the diagnosis of [mental disorders](#) in elderly people", lead scientist Professor Sylke Andreas (Department of Psychology at the Alpen-Adria-Universität) explains. She coordinated the investigation together with Professor Martin Härter, Dr. Jana Volkert and Professor Holger Schulz (Department of Medical Psychology at the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf). When confronted with traditional diagnostic tools, older people soon struggle to remain attentive. What is more, the questions included in established diagnostic methods are often rather long and complicated, further adding to the difficulties experienced by the elderly.

As a first step, the research team, comprising scientists from Spain, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Israel and Switzerland, developed a new diagnostic tool in the shape of a computer-based interview with

simplified sentences. Subsequently, this method was used to examine 3,100 [elderly people](#) (65 to 85 years old) in Spain, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Israel and Switzerland.

The results revealed a prevalence of mental disorders in older people that is significantly higher than had been previously assumed: At the time of the interviews, one third of the respondents had suffered from a mental disorder within the previous year (one year prevalence) and one quarter of the respondents was diagnosed with a current mental disorder. The most common disorders experienced by the respondents in the preceding twelve months were anxiety disorders (17 per cent) and depressive disorders (14 per cent).

According to Sylke Andreas, these results are cause for grave concern, particularly when considered against the background of the health services provided so far. "We need better and more reliable methods to determine whether an older person is suffering from a mental disorder. This goes hand in hand with the urgent need to establish a range of psychotherapeutic services for the elderly, which has been almost entirely absent to date."

More information: Prevalence of mental disorders in elderly people: the European MentDis_ICF65+ study. *British Journal of Psychiatry* September 2016, bjp.bp.115.180463. [DOI: 10.1192/bjp.bp.115.180463e](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.115.180463e)

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