

Older people reluctant to ask for mental health support

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New ECU research has found that more than 40 percent of older Australians with chronic disease would be unlikely to seek help for mental health conditions even if they needed it.

One in seven Australians is aged over 65. But while we're living longer, we're not necessarily living better or happier.

Edith Cowan University (ECU) researcher and psychologist Claire Adams' Ph.D. study investigated help-seeking intentions for [mental health services](#) by [older adults](#) living with chronic conditions such as [cardiovascular disease](#), respiratory disease including asthma, and Type 2 diabetes.

The first part of the study involved 107 people aged over 65 years from both independent living facilities and the community.

Ms Adams said despite frequent contact with the health care system, older adults, particularly those with chronic disease, underutilise mental health services.

"This is concerning because this group of people are significantly more likely to experience anxiety and depression than older adults without chronic disease," she said.

Key findings

Older people with chronic disease who were reluctant to seek mental health support tended to:

- Be sceptical about the benefits of mental health support.
- Believe they lack support from family or friends to seek help.
- Believe they are incapable of accessing services.

Ms Adams said mental health problems could also be difficult to self-identify in older adults with chronic disease because there are overlaps between mental health symptoms, physical symptoms and the side-effects of medication.

"People living with respiratory disease who have difficulty breathing might assume that if their breathing is getting worse that's because their chronic disease is getting worse, however it might actually be a symptom of anxiety," she said.

First visit relieves uncertainty

Importantly, the research also found that people who had used mental health services in the past would be more likely to use them again in the future.

"What this suggests is that the use of mental health services is a positive experience and if we can get people to that first appointment then they are more likely to use them again if they need to.

"It's a good reflection on our mental health system but also an indicator that after taking that first step uncertainty appears to be alleviated," Ms Adams said.

"We need to help people living with chronic disease manage their disease and also live relatively happy lives. One way of doing that is to encourage them to seek help if they need it," she said.

Provided by Edith Cowan University

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