

People with vision impairments up to four times more likely to suffer mental health problems

April 11 2022



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Research by international development organization Sightsavers, University of Ilorin, and the Kogi State Ministry of Health, in Nigeria

has revealed links between vision impairment and poor mental health. The study, published in the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene's (RSTMH) *International Health*, estimates that blind people aged 50 years and over are nearly four times as likely to have self-reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression than those with no vision impairment. Individuals with severe vision impairment are almost three times as likely, and those with moderate visual impairment twice as likely to report having mental health issues.

Globally, at least 2.2 billion people have a visual impairment, yet little is understood about connections between eye health and mental health, particularly in low- to [middle-income countries](#), where impacts of vision loss are exacerbated by poverty and difficulties accessing health services.

The study used a [statistical model](#), vision impairment assessment data and Washington Group anxiety and depression-related questions, to estimate association between vision impairment and self-reported anxiety and/or depression of nearly 4,000 adults in Kogi State. It calls for more research to be done into the relationship between mental health and vision impairment, so they can be effectively addressed through appropriate strategies incorporated during design of eye health programs.

Selben Penzin, Senior Programme Manager—Eye Health at Sightsavers, commented that "the research highlights that there's a substantial mental health burden among people with vision impairment and that eye health shouldn't be considered in a silo; vision plays a critical role in overall health and well-being."

"It's important for governments and organizations to be aware that people with vision impairments may be more likely to have additional mental health needs and design health services to be sensitive to this. Improving vision through targeted policies and integration of inclusive

[eye health](#) services into national health and education systems will improve independence, productivity, and well-being."

"Findings also show the need for further research to understand the knock-on effects of sight loss on mental health, and collaboration between governments and organizations across the world to address the issues."

The study also notes that the relationship between mental health and vision impairment varies by age and gender. The probability of self-reported symptoms of anxiety and/or depression is estimated to be more than four times higher among men with severe visual impairment or blindness and more likely as men age, compared to women with the same levels of vision loss. Social and [cultural norms](#), differences in gender roles and coping styles may account for the gender difference; men are often more economically active than women in Nigeria and may feel greater impact from visual impairment.

Previous studies suggest factors contributing to the association between [vision impairment](#) and poor mental health include the impact vision loss can have on independence, isolation, poverty and employment opportunities.

More information: Ben Gascoyne et al, Vision impairment and self-reported anxiety and depression in older adults in Nigeria: evidence from a cross-sectional survey in Kogi State, *International Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/inthealth/ihab070](https://doi.org/10.1093/inthealth/ihab070)

Provided by Sightsavers

Citation: People with vision impairments up to four times more likely to suffer mental health

problems (2022, April 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-04-people-vision-impairments-mental-health.html>

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