

Help for seniors battling depression

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Medical Xpress)—Three years ago Evelyn Burns-Weinrib attempted suicide. She was 78 years old.

With treatment and counselling at Baycrest Health Sciences in Toronto, Burns-Weinrib has made great strides in her recovery and is fully engaged in life again. And she is sharing her story publicly to encourage other seniors suffering from [depression](#) to seek professional help as soon

as possible.

Burns-Weinrib has also put money behind a [new mental health website](#) for seniors created by the Centre for Mental Health at Baycrest which offers information and encouragement to seniors and families affected by late-life depression. Created by Dr. Robert Madan, Baycrest's chief of psychiatry, and assistant professor of geriatric psychiatry at the University of Toronto, it aims to be both a multi-media resource and a wellspring of hope.

"This website helps visitors understand late-life depression in a way that is friendly, empowering and positive," said Madan. "Depression is not a normal part of aging that's just supposed to be expected and endured."

In Canada, adults 65 and older have the highest suicide rate of any age group, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association.

"I think that this is something that should be talked about, not brushed under the carpet. I will talk about it whenever and wherever I can," said Burns-Weinrib. "When you get older, you face a lot of losses – the loss of your job due to forced retirement or it just disappears, the loss of family members and friends. You lose your physical health, have less money to live on, and you become more dependent on others. I've learned that these are all factors that can trigger depression in seniors."

That important message is reinforced throughout the site: anyone experiencing symptoms of depression needs to reach out and ask for help. Visitors can read information about warning signs of depression, treatment options, depression in long-term care, and learn the difference between healthy grieving and signs of grief that may be complicated by depression. Each module includes video vignettes in which experts in geriatric [mental health](#) deliver information in a style that is personable and consumer-friendly.

An important goal is to break down the twin barriers of fear and stigma related to [mental health issues](#) that often prevent people from talking to a healthcare professional, Madan said.

"Many older adults have grown up with the idea that depression is something you can't talk about openly because it's perceived as a personal failing or a weakness," said Madan. "This website helps older adults understand that depression is a treatable medical illness, just like diabetes or heart disease."

In addition to helping seniors and families, Madan says the site will be a resource for health professionals to refer their older patients to for information about [mental health disorders](#).

"We know that so many people are looking for medical information online now. It's my hope that individuals with late-life depression can find this site and understand that they can get help and get better."

Madan's co-principal investigator for the development of the website was Dr. David Conn, a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at U of T, and vice-president of education at Baycrest. Additional funding for the site was provided by the AFP Innovation Fund and the Geoffrey H. Wood Foundation.

Over the next few years, Madan plans to expand the site to include information on other geriatric mental health topics such as anxiety, bipolar disorder and dementia.

Provided by University of Toronto

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