Exploring Depression in Older Adults, Barriers to Diagnosis and Treatment
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Abstract
Depression affects more than 6.5 million Americans aged 65 and over. Depression in older adults is associated with increased disability and mortality but often goes undiagnosed and untreated, perhaps due to a misconception that depression is a normal response to aging or its symptoms can be mistaken as signs of other health conditions. Stigma may also affect how likely older adults, compared to younger adults, are to seek mental health treatment. This study aimed to better understand depression among older adults and to identify diagnosis and treatment barriers. Methods: Community dwelling adults aged 50 and over were surveyed across 6 sites in Tallahassee. The survey contained scales measuring demographics, depression stigma, treatment seeking attitudes and current depressive symptoms. Results: 109 adults completed the survey. Of these, 70% were female. The mean age was 74. Subjects overwhelmingly indicated depression was not a shameful condition nor did it convey personal weakness. Regarding treatment seeking attitudes, subjects indicated that if they were to experience depression they would be most likely to seek treatment from a doctor (54%) or a mental health professional (50%) and least likely to take medications (54%). While depression is a normal response to aging or its symptoms can be mistaken as signs of other health conditions. Stigma may also affect how likely older adults, compared to younger adults, are to seek mental health treatment. This study aimed to better understand depression among older adults and to identify diagnosis and treatment barriers. We sought to explore attitudes and beliefs about depression in adults age 50 and older. We sought to identify diagnosis and treatment barriers. We hypothesized that depression is underdiagnosed in older adults due in part to generational and cultural attitudes about depression as a sign of mental infirmity, weakness or societal stigma.

What did we want to know?
• We sought to explore attitudes and beliefs about depression in adults age 50 and older.
• We sought to identify diagnosis and treatment barriers.
• We hypothesized that depression is underdiagnosed in older adults due in part to generational and cultural attitudes about depression as a sign of mental infirmity, weakness or societal stigma.

What did we find?

Geriatric Depression Screening Tool Results:
• 79% of participants had less than 5 depressive symptoms in the past week.
• 10% of participants had 9 or more depressive symptoms in the past week.2

Beliefs about depression:
How did we do it?
109 adults were surveyed and 51 adults were interviewed at six Tallahassee senior recreational and living communities.

What did we learn?
• In general, participants did not seem to bear a stigma about depression in others.
• However, when asked about their own depression, while many agreed they knew someone with depression, few indicated experiencing depression themselves.
• Older adults experiencing some depressed mood, however, seemed to be less willing to seek treatment or take an antidepressant if depressed.
• This could suggest that attitudes toward treatment may differ depending on the emotional state of the older adult and/or whether depression was self-identified or identified in others.
• Gender may also play a part in treatment seeking, as more women than men stated they would likely seek treatment if they experienced depression.

What did interviews reveal?

We asked 36 subjects about generational attitudes about depression and 56% stated education about symptoms and awareness to depression now growing up is when they were growing up. Many older adults feel less comments about depression and more comfortable discussing depression.

What did we study?
• Depression is estimated to affect almost 6.5 million Americans aged 65 and over.1
• Depression is often underdiagnosed and subsequently, goes undertreated.
• Depression may be mistaken as normal aging or as a symptom of other comorbidities.
• The stigma of mental illness, coupled with generational attitudes, may contribute to lower diagnosis and treatment rates of depression in older adults.

Who participated?
• 70% of our sample was female, 30% was male.
• Ages ranged from 50 to 95 with a mean age of 74.
• 89% were Caucasian (Non-Hispanic).

If depressed, would they...
• ...talk to a mental health professional?
  50% most likely WOULD
• ...seek treatment from a doctor?
  34% most likely WOULD
• ...modify their lifestyle (exercise, diet, etc.)?
  34% most likely WOULD
• ...take an antidepressant?
  54% most likely WOULD

References