

Mental Health Services

Older Adults' Needs

Older adults need approachable and accessible support for their mental health, to work through new or longstanding clinical conditions.

Insight for Action

Many older adults resist, lack access to, or are unfamiliar with mental health services, leaving them under supported as they face new or compounding challenges to their mental well-being.

Policy Perspectives

There is insufficient mental health screening, referral, coverage, and treatment for older adults in the U.S. These gaps stem from limited understanding and acknowledgment of mental health symptoms resulting from the unique circumstances of being an older adult—including ageism, functional impairment, loss of social connections, and lifelong economic disadvantage. In addition, Medicare is not subject to the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Act, the law that requires insurers to offer mental health and substance use disorder services on par with medical benefits. The burden of untreated mental illness is significant, resulting in impaired quality of life and poor health outcomes.

Policy actions and market solutions are needed to target the symptoms of subclinical mental health conditions, substance use, social drivers, and functional impairments. This includes the use of validated screening tools and protocols, reimbursable treatment for common diagnoses and symptoms, and quality assurance and accountability for both professional and peer support. Additionally, mental health should be integrated with other community, social, and spiritual services that older adults use.

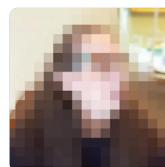
Hear from Older Adults

THEMES

- There are unique mental health challenges to growing older.
- Some mindsets create resistance around seeking help.
- Many older adults face challenges getting mental health support.
- What helps?

“Talk therapy never really helped me.... There's so much more now. You can do emotional freedom technique.... there's EMDR.... When I mentioned it to a therapist... 'Well, I can't do that'.... I have to do a lot of research and advocacy, and you can't find a therapist.”

Theme: Many older adults face challenges getting mental health support.



Melanie

65-70, Woman, Suburban Texas, Below 138% FPL, Medicaid & Medicare (Dual Eligible)

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Konnor

71-75, Man, Urban Pennsylvania, Below 138% FPL, Traditional Medicare

He anticipates he will face more emotional and mental challenges as he ages: "I entertain sometimes no longer living just because of... the emotional mental and emotional challenges of life. Of Aging."

Theme: There are unique mental health challenges to growing older.

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Arthur

65-70, Man, Urban Pennsylvania, 138-400% FPL, Medicare Advantage

"I have good friends.... I feel comfortable knowing that I have people I can call upon if I was suffering emotionally, but I try to not get myself into a position where I have to depend on somebody.... I think that you can see that I'm somewhat eccentric, but I think that I am somewhat grounded in reality. It's very subjective, isn't it? But... I don't need any support. I'm pretty self-sustaining, so I don't need any emotional help. I don't need any mental help, at least at this point. I could be delusional."

Theme: Some mindsets create resistance around seeking help.

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Maxwell

65-70, Man, Suburban Texas, 138-400% FPL, Traditional Medicare

"If it was my best friend or somebody like that, I could tell them anything. But with people that I go to for that kind of support, I've just always been reticent and kept a part of me back.... I've tried to go to different people.... Like five or six different people. I went to all those places. Either they weren't serving, they wanted to see me weekly, which I can't afford \$50 every week. And you know, or they're not taking any other patients anymore. Yeah, it's hard to get like good mental health help. Oh yeah, especially under Medicare."

Theme: Some mindsets create resistance around seeking help.

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Jodie O5

65-70, Woman, Rural Iowa, 138-400% FPL, Traditional Medicare and Federal/State/Union Insurance

"There's a tremendous shortage of mental health professionals that are available.... There's a health desert in a lot of rural counties.... I wish there was a way to have some sort of program available where whatever level of government would step up and say, 'We're going to pay for your last year, or two years, or three years of medical school. In exchange, you have to come to our county and put in so many years of service'. I think that would be a good solution for a lot of the health deserts that do exist. And the same thing with mental health."

Theme: Many older adults face challenges getting mental health support.

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RELATED RESEARCH

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Elshaikh, Usra, Rayan Sheik, Raghad Khaled Mohammad Saeed, Tawanda Chivese, and Diana Alsayed Hassan. "Barriers and Facilitators of Older Adults for Professional Mental Health Help-Seeking: A Systematic Review - BMC Geriatrics." *BioMed Central*, August 25, 2023. <https://bmgeriatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12877-023-04229-x>.

Zilkha, Chloe, Vani Agarwal, and Richard G. Frank. "Suicide Rates Are High and Rising among Older Adults in the US" *Health Affairs*, March 4, 2024. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/forefront.20240228.27143>.

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Carter, Julie. "New Studies on Access to Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Care Highlight the Need for Parity in Medicare." *Medicare Rights Center*, August 24, 2023. <https://www.medicarerights.org/medicare-watch/2023/08/24/new-studies-on-access-to-mental-health-and-substance-use-disorder-care-highlight-the-need-for-parity-in-medicare>.

➤ Visit thepeoplesay.org to watch videos of older adults sharing their aspirations for later life firsthand.

The People Say is a qualitative database designed to help policymakers hear the voices of the public when shaping policy. The database features first-hand insights from a diverse group of older adults and caregivers, as well as feedback from experts on policies affecting older adults. This initiative is a collaboration between the Public Policy Lab and The SCAN Foundation.

