Mental Health and Older Adults

“Working effectively with clients who have a mental illness.”

Kathleen Renfree, LCPC
What is Mental Health?

“Mental Health is the successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity.”

From: Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General

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Mental Health in Older Adults

- Maintain contact with family and friends
- Continue activities that have brought pleasure, but adjust for limitations
- Deal with health issues by adapting and accepting
- Find comfort in memories of the past and engage in activities in the present
Lifespan Transitions in Aging

Age 60-75

- Accepting one’s life
- Maintaining cognitive functioning
- Redirecting energy toward new roles
- Developing a point of view about death

Age 75+

- Coping with physical changes
- Developing a psychohistorical perspective
- Traveling uncharted territory

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What is Mental Illness?

“Mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behavior (or some combination thereof), associated with distress and/or impaired functioning.”

From: A Report of the Surgeon General. Chapter 5: Older Adults and Mental Health

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Mental Illness in Older Adults

Possible to develop at any time in life

• Depression
• Anxiety
• Suicidal Thoughts
• Substance Use or Abuse

• Typically develops early in life
• Bipolar Disorder
• Schizophrenia
• Personality Disorders
Mental Illness in Older Adults

Delirium and Dementia

- Types of delirium
- Alzheimer’s Disease
Signs and Symptoms

Anxiety

- Unexplained fear or feeling of dread or panic
- Restlessness or “feeling on edge”
- Irritability
- Agitation
- Disturbed sleep
- Headaches, muscle tension/pain, chills, hot flashes, gastrointestinal problems
- Easily fatigued, shaking trembling, hand wringing
- Racing or pounding heart, rapid breathing, chest pain, constant worry or fear

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Signs and Symptoms

Depression:

- Change in sleep habits
- Change in appetite
- Change concentration or decision making
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Expressions of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Low mood or apathy
- Low self-esteem
- Loss of pleasure in usual activities
- Expressing a desire to die, thoughts about dying, or making a suicide attempt*

*Seniors over the age of 65 have the highest rate of suicide of any age group

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Suicide Risk Factors

- Change in relationship status
- Highest risk for males within 6 months of a loss
- Lower socioeconomic status
- Retirement/ with no other interests
- Urban living
- Persistent insomnia
- Feelings of guilt and inadequacy
- Estrangement from family and friends
- Delirium/agitation
- Alcoholism
- Depression induced by a physical disorder
- Chronic pain, debilitating or terminal illness
- Threat of extreme dependency or institutionalization

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Signs of Possible Suicidality

- Withdrawal from relationships
- Putting closure on those relationships, saying goodbye, expressing guilt or regrets
- Writing or revising a will or giving away possessions
- Saying “I have nothing to live for, it would be better if I were dead. I don’t care if I wake up…”
Always Err on the Side of Caution!

- Talk to your client and express your concern
- Encourage them to discuss their feelings and seek help
- Connect them with a professional who can evaluate and treat them
- If they are in crisis, call 911

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How do you know when to make a referral?

- What is the client’s history?
- What do you know about them now?
- Compare current functioning to a baseline
- Note new symptoms and behaviors

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Symptoms and Changes in Functioning

- Behavioral changes – isolating, appearing afraid, aggressiveness, crying, impulsive behavior and poor judgment
- Personality changes – less or more friendly than usual, changes in inhibition, distracted, withdrawn
- Changes in Cognition – memory issues, ability to focus, comprehension, lack of insight
- Changes in sleep/nutrition/hygiene – any variation from the norm for the client

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Importance of Follow-through

- Seek Supervision
- Consult with other caregivers
- Refer to a mental health professional
- Coordinate and communicate care plan
Working Effectively with Older Adults with a Mental Illness

- Educate yourself
- RESPECT
- Focus on the person not the symptoms
- Foster the relationship

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Educate Yourself

Know the facts about mental illness
Depression and anxiety are very treatable using:
  Medication
  Talk Therapy
  Support Groups

Substance Use and Abuse: Alcohol and other substances:
  Treatment varies, be aware of use and misuse of pain medication and possible effects

Understand the behavior of those with Dementia and Delirium and provide a calm, non-stimulating, respectful environment. Seek medical attention for Delirium
Be Aware of Challenging Behaviors

- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Changes in sleep patterns
RESPECT

- Express concern and address the feelings expressed
- Speak calmly and reassuringly
- Be flexible and creative
- Help them to reminisce and tell their story
- Connect

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Focus on the Person not the Symptoms

- Remember they were once young too!
- Build rapport and connection
- Be genuine in your relationship
- Remember they are a person with a mental illness, not “a depressive”, or “a bipolar” or “a schizophrenic”.

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Foster the Relationship

- Build trust by demonstrating care and concern
- Provide structure
- Reinforce self-care when possible
- Assist when necessary
- Maintain good boundaries
The Impact of Mental Health and Mental Illness on Aging

- What we know about aging – we all age, but some individuals age well and others have difficulties.

- The importance of early intervention and treatment – the earlier a mental illness is diagnosed and treated the likelihood of recovery is high.

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Continued

- The role of social support - is integral not only to successful aging, but to all stages of life.

- Resilience – an individual’s ability to weather stress, trauma and adversity.

- Resilience occurs when there are cumulative "protective factors"
How to Age Successfully

- Avoid disease
- Maintain social supports
- Maintain high cognitive and physical functioning
- Be willing to find new and flexible solutions to the demands of daily life
- Utilize community supports
- Share your feelings
- Connect to others