



Key Points

What is the issue?

Older adults have a higher rate of suicide than the general population. One of the primary issues is that depression—a major risk factor in late-life suicide—is not well-detected and diagnosed in older adults. Additionally, older adults are not inclined to seek mental health services due to social, cultural, and financial reasons.

“Depression is often mistaken as a natural part of aging, but depression is never a natural part of aging.”

Jo Anne Sirey, Psychologist

Why is this issue important?

The mental health needs of older adults are not being met. This population is unlikely to use mental health services in the way they were originally designed—going to a provider and asking for help. Suicide prevention programs and mental health services must be adapted to better fit the needs of older adults. One way communities can do this is by integrating mental health services into aging services programs such as senior centers.

What are the challenges to addressing the problem?

- Social, financial and cultural reasons can keep older adults who need mental health services from seeking help.
- Older adults may fear others' perceptions regarding the loss of mental capacity.
- Depression is difficult to detect in older adults, particularly among those who have other health issues.
- Depression is assumed to be a natural part of aging so it often goes untreated.
- Mental health services are rarely welcomed into non-mental health settings, including aging services.

How can we overcome these challenges?

- Reach older adults where they are rather than expecting them to go to mental health providers. Senior centers are an ideal setting for offering older adults easy access to mental health services.
- Integrate mental health services into aging services.
- Build relationships—between mental health providers and older adults, and between senior centers and local mental health professionals.
- Provide education to older adults and professionals (e.g., primary care providers and personnel working in aging service programs) to raise awareness about later-life signs of depression and related mental health issues.

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

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