

SENIOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



Monthly Newsletter

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SPOTTING MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS IN OLDER PATIENTS: GETTING BACK TO BASICS

As healthcare professionals, we understand the importance of recognizing both physical and mental health needs in our patients. Older adults, in particular, may face unique mental health challenges that can be easily overlooked during routine check-ups. The ability to spot the signs and symptoms of mental health disorders, especially in this population, is critical to providing holistic care. In this article, we'll explore common mental health concerns in older adults and offer practical guidance on how to identify these issues during patient assessments.

COMMON MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS IN OLDER ADULTS

Mental health disorders in older patients often present differently than in younger individuals. Physical health issues, changes in cognition, and social isolation can complicate diagnosis. Some of the most prevalent mental health disorders among seniors include depression, anxiety, dementia, Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, delirium, and bipolar disorder.

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

While some older patients may openly discuss their emotional well-being, many do not. Mental health issues in older adults can be subtle or masked by physical complaints. Here are key signs to watch for:



- **Changes in mood or energy:** Look for persistent sadness, withdrawal from social interactions, or increased irritability.
- **Memory or cognitive difficulties:** Patients may have trouble recalling recent events, following conversations, or making decisions.
- **Physical complaints without a clear cause:** Headaches, gastrointestinal issues, or unexplained aches and pains can be indicators of depression or anxiety.



- **Increased confusion or disorientation:** Sudden or gradual cognitive changes could point to delirium or early signs of dementia.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Excessive sleep, insomnia, or changes in sleep patterns are common symptoms of depression or anxiety.
- **Loss of interest in daily activities:** If a patient no longer enjoys hobbies or social activities, it could signal depression or cognitive decline.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

To help uncover potential mental health concerns, it's important to ask open-ended questions. Here are some targeted questions to incorporate into patient check-ups:

Depression:

- "How have you been feeling emotionally over the past few weeks?"
- "Have you noticed a lack of interest in activities you usually enjoy?"
- "Do you find it harder to get out of bed or accomplish daily tasks?"

Anxiety:

- "Do you often find yourself worrying about things more than usual?"
- "Do you ever feel nervous or on edge without knowing why?"
- "Have you noticed any physical symptoms like a racing heart or shortness of breath?"

Cognitive Decline (Dementia or Delirium):

- "Have you had any difficulty remembering recent events or conversations?"
- "Do you ever feel confused about where you are or what time it is?"
- "Has anyone mentioned that your behavior or mood has changed recently?"

Sleep Issues:

- "Are you sleeping more or less than usual?"
- "Do you find it hard to stay asleep or wake up feeling unrefreshed?"

Social Withdrawal:

- "Have you been spending time with friends or family as much as you used to?"
- "Do you feel like you've been isolating yourself from others?"



A minute with Mike

MIKE WILLIS, OUTREACH COORDINATOR, THERAPIST

Spotting mental health disorders in older patients requires a careful balance of observation and inquiry. These conversations can sometimes feel challenging, especially when patients are reluctant to discuss their emotions. However, addressing mental health during routine check-ups can lead to early intervention and significantly improve the quality of life for our patients.

By asking the right questions, observing behavior changes, and remaining mindful of the unique ways mental health issues can manifest in seniors, providers can continue to deliver comprehensive care.

If you ever suspect a mental health issue but are unsure, consult with our behavioral health specialists for further evaluation or referral options. For more information or guidance on how to support patients with mental health disorders, please reach out to our Senior Behavioral Health team. Together, we can make a meaningful difference in the lives of our older patients. Our program recommends this [Wellness Checklist](#) that can be used to help initiate mental health conversations with your patients and make the process a little less intimidating.