UNECE

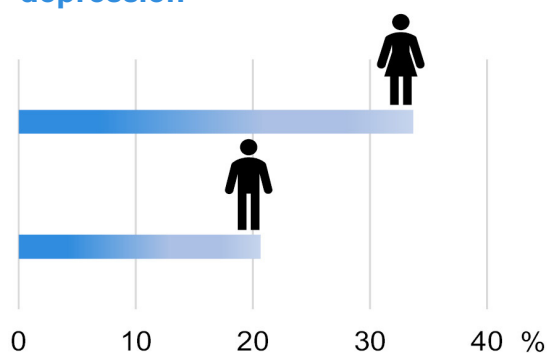**Policy Brief on Ageing**

Mental Health of Older Persons

Many older persons are affected by depression

Source: Based on data for 27 European countries and the United States from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS).

Suggested strategies

- Address specific needs of older persons in mental health policies
- Eliminate stigma and improve mental health literacy
- Combat ageism
- Invest in prevention and early detection
- Tackle psychosocial challenges in work and care
- Support older persons during challenging life events
- Integrate mental health services into primary and long-term care
- Improve access to treatment for mental health care
- Protect mental health of older persons in emergencies
- Enhance research and data collection on mental health of older persons

A significant share of older persons is affected by mental disorders with a concerning increase in prevalence in recent years. Loneliness, a major risk factor, impacts up to 30 per cent of older persons in some countries, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, mental health conditions among older persons often go unnoticed and untreated. This is due to a combination of factors, including the fact that symptoms of mental disorders among older persons are often overlooked due to other physical or cognitive limitations or dismissed as a normal part of ageing. This is particularly the case for older women, older persons with lower socio-economic status as well as those living in long-term care facilities.

Policy challenge

Effectively promoting, protecting, and caring for the mental health of older persons requires addressing several challenges. This involves closing the significant treatment gap, which leaves a majority of mental health conditions among older persons untreated. It also requires mitigating the negative impacts of poor mental health on older persons and their families, while protecting vulnerable groups like those in long-term care facilities. Due to the multiple and intersecting factors putting older persons from disadvantaged backgrounds at a greater risk of mental disorders, addressing the wider social disparities in mental health is equally important.

Improving mental health of older persons is a human rights imperative. It will also contribute in many ways to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being at all ages.

The full brief can be accessed here

Policy strategies to improve the mental health of older persons

Addressing barriers for older persons to seek help by combating ageism, eliminating stigma and improving mental health literacy

Older persons face a double burden in mental health due to stigma surrounding mental illness and ageism. This creates barriers to accessing adequate treatment and negatively impacts their mental health. Effective policy strategies aimed at eliminating stigma and increasing mental health literacy include raising awareness about common mental health conditions among older persons, their symptoms, and available resources for support. To combat ageism a series of evidence-based strategies are available, including enforcing policies and legislation to combat age discrimination, implementing educational initiatives, and promoting intergenerational contact programmes.

Investing in prevention and early detection

Prevention and early detection play fundamental roles in mitigating the onset and progression of mental health disorders among older persons. Promoting healthy lifestyles, regular physical activity, and mental well-being throughout life can significantly enhance mental well-being in older age, building a foundation for resilience. Furthermore, systematic screening programmes within health-care settings, especially when targeted at those with increased risk, can be effective to identify mental health issues at an early stage.

Improving access to treatment

Improving mental health-care access for older adults requires the integration of mental health services into primary care and the training of health-care professionals in geriatric mental health. Expanding telehealth options can further increase accessibility. Talk therapy can effectively address common issues like anxiety and depression. Furthermore, overcoming barriers like cost, distance, and provider shortages is crucial. Integrating mental health services into long-term care facilities and developing specialized services for older persons affected by mental health conditions and other chronic conditions like dementia or cognitive impairment ensure that they receive tailored support that addresses their specific needs.

Providing support at work and during challenging life events

Challenging life events include forced retirement, becoming a caregiver, bereavement, severe illness, institutionalization, as well as emergencies. Counselling specifically tailored to the situations faced by older adults can provide important support. Other measures include support groups, individual therapy sessions, and educational resources to help navigate these complex situations and build resilience when faced with life challenges.

Enhancing research and data collection

Strengthening the evidence base through robust data collection and research on mental health challenges specific to older populations is key for informing policy decisions and assessing progress. Additional research on the effectiveness of mental health interventions for older persons as well as possible side effects of medications can ensure that older persons receive support that is evidence-based and that protects them from adverse effects of medications.

Recommendations

The mental health of older persons is influenced by the accumulation of experiences and challenges encountered throughout life, including in later life. Therefore, a life course approach to mental health is important.

However, older persons face unique mental health challenges because of intersecting vulnerabilities and challenges related to loss of functional and cognitive capacity, loss of social connections and bereavement, among others. Mental health policies should therefore include targeted strategies that address these specific needs. Numerous concrete examples of such targeted strategies are featured in the full version of this Policy Brief.

Collaboration among diverse stakeholders and the involvement of older persons with mental health conditions in decision-making will ensure inclusive policies that address social inequalities, promoting good mental health and dignified lives for all older persons.