

GERIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH

In July 2008, Congress overrode the President's veto and passed the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act, establishing Medicare mental health parity which will be phased in beginning in 2010. Currently, people with Medicare pay 50% co-pay for outpatient mental health services, while only paying 20% for physical illness treatment. This law will establish the same co-payment rates, making mental health services more affordable to seniors.

Studies have shown that approximately 20% of Americans 55 or older experience specific mental health problems in a given year. According to Dr. Bradley Karlin, Director of Psychotherapy Programs for the U.S. Department of Veterans Services, "We are failing our nation's elderly population when it comes to meeting their mental health needs." Research has shown that undiagnosed and untreated mental health problems affect a person's ability to recover from other health problems, such as a broken hip or heart attack.

Some seniors continue to avoid mental health services because of the stigma. Some are not aware that mental illness may be due to a chemical problem, not unlike diabetes. Others believe that nothing can be done to help. Studies have shown that treatment is effective – both medications and psychotherapy. All you need to engage in psychotherapy is a curiosity about why you feel the way you do.

Some seniors think that depression is a normal part of getting older. This is a false assumption. Depression is not a normal part of aging but may be a response to a major life change such as severe illness, surgery, moving or loss of a spouse or another significant person.

If you want to learn more or think you might have some mental health problems, talk with your doctor or other health care professional; set up a consultation at the senior center; or do some research by checking these web sites: The Geriatric Mental Health Foundation at www.gmhfonline.org; the Mental Health & Aging Web Site Advocacy Project at www.mhasp.org; or the National Institute on Aging at www.nia.nih.gov.