



Welcome!

Thank you for your interest in Older Americans' Mental Health Week, an annual opportunity to spread the message that mental illness is not a normal part of aging. Older Americans' Mental Health Week is May 24-30, 2009.

This toolkit will help you raise public awareness in your community.

Public awareness increases a community's understanding of mental illness and reduces the stigma that keeps many older Americans from seeking help. Public awareness activities can range from an information display at a library to a speaker panel event. Together, during Older Americans' Mental Health Week, we will continue to tell the American public and policy makers that:

- Mental illness is not a normal part of aging.
- Mental illnesses are real, common and treatable.
- The more people know, the more they can help themselves and others.
- Healthy adults continue to learn, enjoy life and contribute to society.

Public policy should promote mental health, not discriminate against older adults who have mental health problems.

Mental Health in Older Americans

One in four American adults have a diagnosable mental illness, but less than one-quarter of older adults with mental illness get any type of mental health attention, let alone appropriate treatment.

Undiagnosed and untreated mental illness has serious implications for older adults and their loved ones. ***Older women, who both live longer than men and often remain family caregivers, are particularly affected.*** Older women bear the brunt of restrictive public health policies that discourage diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.

Consider one common illness: depression. One in eight women will become depressed sometime throughout their lives. The highest rate of depression in women is among middle-aged Hispanic women, and African American women have the second highest rate. Women are more than twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depression and typically live six years longer, further expanding the opportunity for undiagnosed illness. As caregivers, midlife and older women are often left to deal with undiagnosed and untreated mental health disorders in others.

Older Americans, family members, caregivers, neighbors and friends need to know the difference between healthy grieving over losses and unhealthy depression, between normal worries and anxiety disorders, and between normal use and overuse of alcohol and medications to dull emotional and/or physical pain.