

Older adults with existing depression show resilience during the pandemic

A multi-site study finds that seniors are more concerned with being infected with COVID-19 than the effects of social isolation

A study involving older adults with pre-existing major depressive disorder living in Los Angeles, New York, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis found no increase in depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers from five institutions, including CAMH, found that the older adults, who were already enrolled in ongoing studies of treatment resistant depression, also exhibited resilience to the stress of physical distancing and isolation. The findings were published in peer-reviewed journal, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*.

“We thought they would be more vulnerable to the stress of COVID because they are the most vulnerable population,” said Benoit Mulsant, a clinician scientist at CAMH and the Labatt Family Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. “These older adults with depression told us that struggling with depression taught them to be resilient.”

For the study, researchers conducted interviews with the participants, all of whom were over the age of 60, with an average age of 69, during the first two months of the pandemic. Using two scales for depression and anxiety, researchers found no changes in the participants’ depression, anxiety, or suicidality before and during the pandemic.

Researchers further determined that:

- Participants were more concerned about the risk of contracting the virus than the risks of isolation.
- While all are physically distanced, most are using virtual technology to connect with friends and family.
- While they were coping, many participants said their quality of life was lower, and they worry their mental health will suffer with continued physical distancing.

Participants were upset by the inadequate governmental response to the pandemic. Based on these findings, the study authors wrote that policies and interventions to provide access to medical services and opportunities for social interaction are needed to help older adults maintain mental health and quality of life as the pandemic continues.

These findings offer takeaways for others while weathering the pandemic.

Mulsant said, “These older persons living with depression have been under stress for a longer time than many of the rest of us. We could draw upon their resilience and learn from it.”

The study identified several self-care and coping strategies used by the participants, including maintaining regular schedules; distracting themselves from negative emotions with hobbies, chores, work or exercise; and focusing on immediate surroundings and needs without thinking beyond the present.

The authors further emphasized that access to mental health care and support groups, and continued social interaction are needed to help older adults weather the pandemic.

Researchers from the University of Pittsburgh, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons/the New York State Department of Mental Health, Washington University in St. Louis and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health/University of Toronto.

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