

# The mental health needs of older people

There is a tendency among members of the public and some professionals that mental health problems in older age equate to dementia. There is a concern that this leads to mental health problems other than dementia (known as functional mental health problems) being overlooked or given scant attention with older people and family members being left to manage as well as they can.

Studies have highlighted that depression is under-diagnosed in older people, particularly in men, and that symptoms can be accepted as a normal part of the ageing process. It is also noted that the risk of suicide increases with older age, with depression as one of the risk factors.

It is also recognised that carers, usually spouses, are themselves older people and in caring, can experience loss of the marital relationship they once had. Caring for others is again a high risk for poor mental health or developing mental health problems

Other factors which influence the mental health and well-being of older people include:

- Living on your own
- Having a physical illness or becoming disabled
- Having little money
- Not having contact with family or friends.

These factors can lead to social isolation and loneliness in older people. Cattani has made a useful distinction between social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation is defined as imposed isolation from desired social networks due to, for example:

- Physical isolation – lack of transport, lack of money, unsuitable housing
- Deteriorating health
- Loss of mobility.

Loneliness is defined as a negative subjective feeling often following the loss of someone or something central in life such as:

- Death of partner
- Retirement from employment
- Moving home
- Children moving away.

Cattani proposes different solutions for social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation requires practical supports e.g. transport, whereas loneliness requires social support, with reciprocity as an important part of improved social networks. Establishing groups for older people offers this social support which includes company, companionship, feeling valued, having a role in life as well as psychological benefits such as enjoyment, increased confidence, feeling safe, sharing and learning new skills. Groups with a dual purpose i.e. skills-based activity with social support and companionship, are reported to be especially valued by older people.

Making the above distinction between social isolation and loneliness clarifies why MOOD's service for older people who have or are at risk from depression offer an enhanced resource which is distinct from lunch clubs or community centre activities for older people.