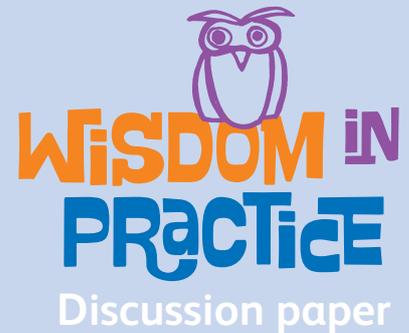


Older People's Mental Health and Wellbeing



What we mean by mental health and wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is important for all of us. It is how we think, feel and act and how we get on with other people.

- Good mental health and wellbeing helps us cope with life's problems and make the most of life's opportunities.
- It helps us flourish in each situation – our families, friendships, managing at home and so on.
- It is when we feel good and act well, both individually and together.

Mental health problems are when we have difficulties with our mental health which affect how we go about our everyday lives.

Mental illness refers to illnesses or conditions that a doctor can identify, which affect how we think, feel or act.

“Good mental wellbeing is as important in older age as it is at any other time of life.”

What is happening?

Since 2007 the Scottish Government has made promoting good mental wellbeing for everyone a priority.

Most older people have good mental health and wellbeing. But poorer mental wellbeing and living with mental health problems are more common in older people than in younger adults or in young people. For example, depression is the most common mental health problem in later life and affects up to 25 percent of people aged over 65 at some point.

The factors that help people have good mental wellbeing and stay well include keeping in touch with other people, feeling you have a purpose in life, and keeping physically and mentally active. Changes in our lives as we get older can mean that there are fewer supports for good mental wellbeing at a time in our lives when we face more challenges.

Many older people who have mental health problems such as depression, stress or anxiety are not getting access to treatment and to other supports that could improve their health and

wellbeing. Sometimes this is because people are reluctant to ask for help because of their concerns about stigma or the effects of taking medication. Sometimes it is because professionals are less aware of the mental health needs of older people or of the benefits of medication and of other therapies for older people.

There are fewer mental health services for people aged over 65 than for younger adults. Many services aimed at older people focus more on people with dementia than on other mental health problems. Community-based mental health services often have an upper age limit of 60 or 65.

People who have lived with mental health problems through their lives may find that the support and ways of coping which worked when they are younger are no longer there.

More community based services which benefit older people's mental health and wellbeing have started in the past few years, although the spread seems to still be patchy.

“The reality is that older people are as capable as younger people of enjoying life, taking on challenges, coping with difficulties, engaging in satisfying activities, supporting each other with warmth and good humour, and making a real contribution to their families and communities, using their wealth of knowledge and experience.”

What contributes to good wellbeing for older people?

A UK Inquiry into Mental Health and Wellbeing in Later Life talked to older people about what was important to them and what made a difference. These are similar factors to those that make a difference to the mental wellbeing of younger people but are in the context of older people's lives.

- Discrimination was the biggest barrier to good mental health and wellbeing for older people. This was mostly around people's age but also other circumstances such as ethnicity or sexuality.
- Relationships with friends, family, neighbours and other people are all important. People also want to feel part of their wider community.

- Participation is important. Older people want to be able to participate in their communities and in the decisions that are made about things which affect them.
- Health is important - people's physical and their mental health. Having access to good services to support your health is also a big factor.
- Money matters. People want to have enough income and not worry about money. They also want to have enough to enable them to provide for other people who matter to them and feel part of society.

Mental Health and Well-being in Later Life was commissioned by Age Concern and the Mental Health Foundation. The report was published in 2003.

“My friends kept me going after my wife died. But I lost touch with people after a spell in hospital last year. I know I’m not well in myself but I don’t know what to do about that.”

“I want to go out and do the things I used to just like before but it all seemed too risky and too expensive. And now it’s getting me down and I don’t have the energy to get going again.”

“I’ve lived with mental health problems all my adult life. You might think it is easier as you get older, but it’s harder.”

What makes a difference

It helps when older people get encouragement and opportunities to talk about their mental wellbeing. People describe how mental health problems and poor mental wellbeing may not get picked up when staff doing assessments are looking for physical health problems, difficulties with memory and risks to people's safety.

Many older people can be reluctant to talk about mental health problems because they associate this with stigma. It helps when local campaigns to promote good mental wellbeing or to raise awareness and understanding include older people.

“There is too much focus on things like falls etc – they don’t ask questions to find out how older people are doing generally. If you do you can discover lots of other things that are going on in a person’s life.”

“People just think, getting low mood, depression etc are just part of getting old! Or they are the early signs of dementia. Not necessarily. Often simple things can sort it. But if we don’t say and no-one tells us, we don’t get the help that is there.”

“For my generation mental health means being locked up in asylums or getting pills that take away all your energy and personality.”

“You just soldier on. That’s what we were taught to do.”

“It’s a great pity the see me campaign [national campaign to challenge stigma around mental health problems] seems to have forgotten about older people. But we can do our own campaign.”

People describe how one change in their lives - such as having a fall, or the person you care for being unwell - can lead to fewer contacts with friends and other support. This in turn leads to people losing confidence and the cycle of factors affecting someone's mental wellbeing builds up. It helps when there are people and services which provide early support and reach out to people.

It helps when community activities which are in touch with older people are 'mental wellbeing aware'. If they know the circumstances which make people more vulnerable to poor mental wellbeing, they can watch out for this and take steps at an early stage. If volunteers and staff have confidence in their ability to support people and are comfortable talking about mental health and wellbeing issues, it is easier for them to offer support to people who need this.

Information and easy access to sources of support for people who have mental health problems makes a difference. This can include supports that are especially relevant to older people. Examples include bereavement support, telephone support services and peer support.

Some of the ways support services are organised can contribute to problems for some people. Examples are home care services being delivered at times which prevent people using day activities or seeing friends, and very short visits which do not enable people to have a relationship with the people who provide the care. It helps when people have more choices in how and when care services are provided and when they are encouraged to plan for support which helps their wider wellbeing. There are changes to the way social care is provided which are designed to give people more choice and bring more benefits for people's quality of life. These came into effect from April 2014.

It helps when mental health services do not have a rigid upper age limit which means people with longer-term mental health problems lose the support they have come to rely on when they reach 60 or 65. Some mental health organisations are developing services which are designed for people in their 60s and older, to give clients or members more choice and continuity.

What groups led by older people can do

People can talk about mental wellbeing and about mental health.

Have information about places where people can get advice and support around mental wellbeing for themselves or people they care about.

Have activities that contribute to good mental wellbeing. The list is huge and includes many activities that are initially planned for another reason, such as encouragement to eat well through cooking groups, walking groups and exercise groups, hobbies and leisure activities, and ways for people to come together at weekends or over holiday periods.

Create opportunities for people to talk about things which make life more difficult, such as experience of discrimination or of losing people and roles that matter.

IT support to enable people to use the internet can bring many benefits for people's mental wellbeing, including for people who are not able to get out much. It is a way to get involved again in hobbies and interests, discover new interests, and keep in touch with family and friends.

There is evidence that men are even more at risk of poor mental health and wellbeing because they're less likely to say when they find things hard and are not well. Older people's groups can get involved in men's sheds and other projects which work well for men such as football (playing it, talking about it or both).

Groups can be alert for members or people in the community who are not having as much contact with others as before, and go to them.

Build in buddy support to encourage people who have poor mental wellbeing or low confidence to start coming to the group or to activities.

Look for ways people can contribute and keep busy within your project or group, rather than only receiving care or having other people help them.

“The best thing we’ve done is try to make it ok to say ‘I’m having a bad day’ or ‘I’m a bit down today’. It makes it normal. And whereas everyone has the odd low spell it helps us spot when someone is struggling.”

“The research says that exercise can help with preventing depression and can aid recovery. A short walk of about 10 minutes outside has been shown to improve low mood. We can do that.”

“There is a centre which gives lunches to frail old people who are not able to cook for themselves and need looked after during the day. But we knew of people who were physically ok but struggling with mental health problems and not looking after themselves. They were not a priority for the service but wouldn’t have wanted to go there anyway. So we started our own lunch thing which is more about friendships and having a good time. We go to a local restaurant once in a while and planning where to go is part of the fun.”

Groups led by older people can also work in partnership with other community groups or with larger organisations which provide services used by older people.

- A group can work with a local mental health service to raise awareness about mental health and wellbeing for older people or to develop support that older people feel comfortable using.
- There are care homes which are keen to find more opportunities for older people who live there to have more company and be involved in their local community.
- Groups which are in touch with older people from BME communities sometimes find it hard to support people around their mental health and wellbeing and can find it helpful when other older people share approaches they have found helpful.

Continuing the discussion

Are there older people in your group or community who could benefit from easier access to support for their mental health and wellbeing?

Are there ways local services and community groups, including groups led by older people, can be part of creating a wider range of supports for people?

Are there ways local groups can help raise awareness about mental health and wellbeing among older people and tackle the stigma around mental health problems? How could older people be part of this?

How can the plans for develop services to benefit older people in your community include good support for people's mental health and wellbeing?

What would help people at your group or service feel more confident in welcoming and supporting people who have not-so-good mental health and wellbeing?



Information and advice

Support for individual people

Breathing Space is a free, confidential phone and web-based service for people in Scotland who are experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety. It is linked to NHS 24.

- The contact number for the telephone helpline is 0800 83 85 87. This service is available at evenings and weekends.
- The website is www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk

Steps for Stress shows people the steps they can take to reduce stress and improve their wellbeing. It was developed by the NHS in Scotland. www.stepsforstress.org

Samaritans offers a safe, confidential space for people to talk about whatever is troubling them. Trained volunteers offer round the clock support by telephone, email and text message, to anyone who is struggling to cope.

People can contact Samaritans at any time of the day or night by calling the national number 08457 90 90 90, by emailing jo@samaritans.org or by texting 07725 90 90 90.

Samaritans also offers support face-to-face and people can visit www.samaritans.org to find their nearest branch.

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland provides telephone and face-to-face support for people who are affected by bereavement.

- The national phoneline is 0845 600 2227.
- The website is www.crusescotland.org.uk

The Mental Health Foundation has produced a booklet with useful tips to protect our mental wellbeing. It is aimed at people approaching retirement or who have recently retired from work but is useful for people in other circumstances too. <http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/how-to-later-life.pdf?view=Standard>

Age UK has useful notes for older people <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing/conditions-illnesses/depression>

Information for groups and people with an interest in developing services

The Wisdom in Practice website has material on related topics: www.wisdominpractice.org.uk

- The discussion paper on keeping active has more examples and sources of information on ways to benefit people's physical and mental wellbeing.
- The discussion paper on social inclusion includes examples of ways to reduce loneliness.
- There is more information on men's sheds at the topics section.

Age UK has produced a list of community projects which have been effective in promoting good mental health among older people. It was written for staff in local authorities or the NHS who commission services for older people but the ideas are useful for community groups too. http://www.ageuk.org.uk/Documents/EN-GB/For-professionals/Care/Mental%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20in%20later%20life_pro.pdf?dtrk=true

The report from Promoting Health and Wellbeing in Later Life is in the resources section at www.wisdominpractice.org.uk

About Wisdom in Practice

Wisdom in Practice is a project which supports and promotes the development of services and other activities led by older people. It is funded by the Scottish Government through the Equalities Programme and is run by Outside the Box.

There is a range of resources for groups, including publications, 'how to guides', events and development support for individual groups and projects.

This is one of a series of discussion papers on topics which older people have said are important to them.

There is more information at www.otbds.org/wisdom

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