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**LIFESPAN HEALTH
AND WELLBEING
RESEARCH CENTRE**

GP information brochure

Anxiety and depression in older adults



Recognise the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in the older adult and support them to stay mentally healthy

Anxiety and depression in older adults

Lifespan Health and Wellbeing Research Centre

February 2026

This brochure was created by Dr Denise Meuldijk and Professors Viviana Wuthrich, Brian Draper and Henry Brodaty for Beyond Blue and is freely distributable



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Anxiety and depression in older adults

Symptoms of anxiety and depression are often missed in older adults

Anxiety and depression in older adults may be difficult to recognise because they often show different symptoms than younger people. Some older adults with depression don't necessarily feel sad but they may complain of lack of motivation or may be grumpy. Likewise, anxiety disorders are often difficult to distinguish from health concerns. Older adults are also not good at recognising anxiety and depression in themselves. Anxiety and depression are also often missed in older people because it is thought to be normal for their age and circumstance.

For these reasons, anxiety and depression in late life may be more likely to be underdiagnosed than in younger age groups.

Without appropriate detection, appropriate treatments may not be provided to older adults with anxiety and/or depression, despite evidence for the benefits of psychological and psychiatric assistance.

Untreated anxiety and depression are problematic and increase risks for:

- Medication use
- Disability
- Social isolation
- Service use
- Dementia
- Suicide (particularly in men)

Co-occurring disorders

While anxiety and depression are different conditions, it is not uncommon for them to occur at the same time. In some cases, one can even lead to the onset of the other. They are also often associated with physical health conditions. **It is recommended that GPs do a basic physical health screen.**

An older person is more likely to present to their GP with various physical complaints (such as chronic pain, constipation, dry mouth, physical weakness) and difficulty with concentration and sleeping, rather than complaints of sadness or low mood

Anxiety and depression in older adults

Signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in older adults

Anxiety:

- Reporting lots of “concerns” about their and others’ health, and family issues
- Often reporting feelings of agitation, uneasiness, racing heart, panicky, shakiness, tensions
- Avoiding trying new things, going out and meeting new people
- Overwhelmed easily by activities or tasks
- Difficulty sleeping and/or fatigue
- Difficulty making decisions and commitments

Depression:

- Lost motivation to do tasks around the home, usual interests and activities
- Avoiding social interactions (e.g. increased time alone, on the computer or other isolating activity)
- Feeling “blah” – not themselves
- Feeling hopeless and helpless about the future
- Poor concentration and memory
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of self-esteem

An extensive list of symptoms common to anxiety and depression in older adults is listed below. This list can be used to help identify anxiety or depression in older adults. It is important not to dismiss these as a “normal” part of ageing.

Behaviours

Anxiety:

- Avoiding objects or situations which cause anxiety
- Urges to perform certain rituals or checking behaviours to relieve anxiety
- Not being assertive (i.e. avoiding eye contact)
- Difficulty making decisions
- Being startled easily

Depression:

- General slowing down or restlessness
- Neglect of responsibilities and self-care
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Decline in day-to-day ability to function, being confused and agitated
- Inability to find pleasure in any activity
- Difficulty getting motivated in the morning
- Behaving out of character

Anxiety and depression in older adults

Thoughts and feelings

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Moodiness or irritability (which may present as angry or aggressive)
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loss of self-esteem
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- Loss of interest in once pleasurable activities
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Excessive worry or preoccupation with physical health

Other behaviours:

- Agitation, hand wringing, pacing
- Frequent crying
- Indecisiveness
- Neglect of responsibilities and self-care
- Concentration difficulties

Physical symptoms

- Increased heart rate/racing heart
- Vomiting, nausea or pain in the stomach
- Dizzy, lightheaded or faint
- Fatigue and loss of energy
- Difficulty sleeping, early-morning awakening or oversleeping
- Eating more or less than usual, usually with unplanned weight gain or loss
- Dizzy, lightheaded or faint
- Muscle tension and pain
- Hot or cold flushes
- Moving or talking more slowly
- Headaches or digestive problems (such as constipation, diarrhoea, upset stomach) without a clear physical cause and/or that do not ease with treatment

The symptoms of anxiety and depression in older people often develop slowly and subtly, making it difficult to recognise when symptoms have become a concern.