

Aging and Depression: Challenges and Protective Factors Explored

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Depression affects millions of people worldwide. Although younger adults are more likely to get depressed, when seniors suffer depression, it can have significant consequences, including a suicide risk and a negative impact on physical health outcomes. The various challenges of aging cause stress, especially those that impact our abilities and sense of control.

Aging also puts people at risk for other physical and cognitive issues that may trigger or worsen depression. Depression in seniors is different from depression in other age cohorts. Advanced age is reflected in depression's presenting symptoms, age-related risk and protective factors, and potential outcomes. Depressed older adults are less likely to present with affective symptoms and more likely to present with somatic symptoms.

Depression and physical health issues seem to have a circular relationship, which can lead to increased disability, loss of vitality, and increased mortality risk. Diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, dementia, cancer, and other chronic diseases have this circular relationship with depression in a bidirectional cause and effect.

Diagnosing depression in older adults is challenging, as it often presents multifaceted and somatic symptoms that resemble an "organic" medical disease. The complexity of a multitude of factors and the possibility of pharmacological-resistant depression make treatment complicated. Depression in seniors often requires a complex interplay of levels and types of care from several providers working together.

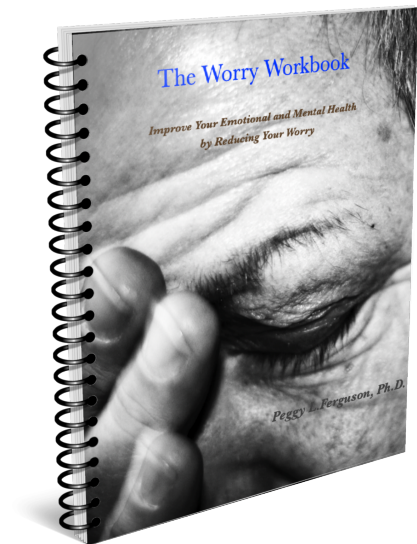
Protective Factors can mitigate the influence of risk factors and the impact of depression when it does occur. Treatment interventions often target some of the same protective factors. High self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, a healthy lifestyle, and an optimistic worldview are protective factors that reduce the probability of developing senior depression. Resilience helps mitigate the impact of some risk factors in late life. Education level and socio-economic status can be protective factors. Active engagement in essential life activities helps in predictable ways to prevent depression. Religious or spiritual practice has a high protective factor value. We aim to reduce the risk of depression in older adults by promoting healthy behaviors, reducing the impact of risk factors, and enhancing protective factors through prevention and treatment interventions.

Patient education for chronic diseases serves as a prevention and a treatment. The goals are to improve medication compliance and lifestyle and environmental contributions to care and recovery. It uses a behavioral intervention to engage patients in new, health-enhancing behavior. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps to challenge and change counter-therapeutic thoughts and beliefs that lead to behavior that gets in the way of good health. Problem-solving training and support teach patients to develop problem-solving approaches that improve resilience, self-confidence, and self-efficacy. Group support, behavioral and cognitive interventions, and problem-solving activity promote engagement, social involvement and skill development, and intellectual stimulation. Life review is another tool that supports psychological well-being by looking at your life experiences and finding meaning and purpose in those events and your life. Psychiatrists and medical doctors also pharmacologically treat depression. They are responsible for maintaining awareness of all medications that may have a side effect on depression symptoms and explaining the depressive impact of certain medical illnesses.

The challenges of life in older adults are many and have a complex relationship with the development of depression. Complex interactions among genetic vulnerabilities, cognitive patterns, age-associated neurobiological changes, and stressful events may be risk factors for late-life depression. Insomnia, inactivity, reduction of daily activities, and

isolation are also neglected risk factors. Prevention and treatment include specific education for chronic illnesses, encouragement of self-care activities, skills training, cognitive therapy, and other modalities that can effectively reduce depression. Individuals, families, and healthcare providers should maintain awareness of the potential risks and protective factors associated with depression in older adults so that they can help seniors take steps to mitigate risks and promote good mental and physical health.

Reducing worry plays a role in preventing depression and in improving overall mental well-being. As explored in the discussion on aging and depression, seniors face a myriad of challenges, from health concerns to lifestyle changes, which can contribute to elevated stress levels. By addressing and mitigating worry, we actively engage in a preventive approach against the onset of depression in this age group. "The Worry Workbook" becomes a valuable instrument in this preventive strategy. It aligns with the protective factors discussed in preventing senior depression. Lifestyle adjustments like those recommended in the workbook help manage worry and contribute to overall well-being. "The Worry Workbook" can assist with one of the contributing factors to late-life depression, paving the way for a more resilient and mentally robust phase of life.



The Worry Workbook
By Peggy L. Ferguson,
Ph.D.

\$4.95