

Testimony of Mildred M. Reynolds, Ed.D., MSW
To the Policy Committee of the White House Conference on Aging
Consequences of Untreated Mental Health Conditions and Substance Abuse in Older Adults and
Benefits of Treatment: A Consumer's Perspective
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I am Dr. Mildred Reynolds representing the National Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance and am also a Board member of the International Center for Global Aging.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today from the perspective of an Older Adult (I am 74) and as one who has struggled with a mental illness namely, clinical depression much of my life. I know from first hand experience what a difference receiving a proper diagnosis and treatment can make. I am sure that I would not be here today if I had not eventually been treated properly; in fact, I might not even be alive. There were times the mental pain was so great that I just wanted to end my life to escape that pain. Twenty-seven years passed from the time I first sought help until I was given the diagnosis of depression and properly treated with medication. However, it took nine more years of trying various medications before one was developed that worked really well for me.

But am I an exception? Unfortunately, I am not. When my picture appeared in *Parade Magazine* in an article that called depression "America's Hidden Disease," people from over twenty-five states and as far away as Hawaii called me even though my phone number was not published. They were eager to talk to someone who had recovered. But unfortunately, many of them had already tried various treatments and had not found anything that was completely satisfactory. We of the older generation grew up in an era when far less was known about depression and other mental illnesses and there were far fewer treatments available. Furthermore the stigma that surrounded mental illness caused many to not want to seek help. Fortunately, we now know how to diagnose and treat depression effectively so---

Why Should We Be Concerned About The Mental Health of our Older Population?

* Older Americans comprise the most rapidly growing segment of the population with those over 85 the fastest growing of all.

* The Global Burden of Disease Study found that mental illness is the second leading cause of disability and premature death throughout the world. It has been estimated that by 2020 depression will be the second leading cause of disability world-wide.

We of the older generation grew up in an era when far less was known about mental illness and there were far fewer treatments available. But today we are better able to diagnose and have treatments that are effective for most people and most others can be helped. Still many OA do not receive the help they need because their illness is

UNRECOGNIZED and UNREPORTED to their doctor because they do not recognize the symptoms or they are too ashamed to admit they might have a mental illness.

UNDIAGNOSED by professionals. So often common symptoms like sadness are attributed to their many losses and other stresses.

UNTREATED or UNDERTREATED if the dosage is not adequate or it is taken for too short a time.

Consequences of untreated depression include:

* Depression can be fatal. There are more suicides in this country than homicides. Older adults have the highest suicide rate of any age group with persons 85 and older having a rate almost double that of the general population.

* An estimated 17% of older adults misuse and abuse alcohol and medications trying to make themselves feel better.

* Recovery time after surgery or from an illness is longer if one is depressed or has another mental illness.

What We Can Do

* We need to do a better job of educating the public that:

+ Mental illness is a medical illness, not a weakness nor a character flaw.

+ Depression is not a normal part of aging but warrants a correct diagnosis and proper treatment.

+ Effective treatments for depression and other mental illnesses are available.

* We need to train more professionals to work with Older Adults.

* We need additional research so that we can better understand and find ways to treat some illnesses such as Alzheimers and other dementias. I live in a retirement home with 1500 residents and I have witnessed the tragedy of seeing individuals lose their ability to drive, walk, talk and feed themselves or recognize their loved ones. Many of the men of this older generation fought our wars but are left to die alone on wards receiving only custodial care.

* We must not forget the caregivers many of whom are on call round the clock which is conducive to exhaustion, depression and more susceptible to illness.

* Treatment must be AVAILABLE, AFFORDABLE and ACCESSIBLE. The most modern clinic with the best trained professionals will not help if the people who need the services cannot get there. E.g. For me to see my psychiatrist I drive to a subway station, take a train downtown, walk four blocks, and then climb steps to get into the building. What will happen when my arthritis worsens and I can't climb the steps or can no longer drive to the subway station? Furthermore, I am exhausted by the time I get there one and one-half hours later.

* We also must not forget the caregivers many of whom are on call around the clock which can leave one feeling depressed, exhausted or more susceptible to illness.

Our older people who have worked to give us the standard of life that we enjoy today are just as deserving of having their mental illnesses diagnosed and treated as those with physical illnesses.

My journey from the depths of despair at age 30 to the present when at 74 I feel healthier and happier than I have ever been has been a long one. I am reminded of the woman who called me after seeing my picture in *Parade Magazine*. She told me that she had tried everything she knew to do and nothing had worked. She felt so desperate she was contemplating suicide. She explained, "When I got up this morning, I thought today would be my last but when I looked at your picture and saw the smile on your face, it gave me hope." Let us do everything we can to give our older adults with mental illnesses the help they need. For----
With help, there is HOPE.

I know - I've been there!