

Mental Health of Older People

There are many myths about illnesses in all age groups and some myths unique to mental illnesses in older people.

The most common myth is that mental health illnesses, particularly depression and dementia, are seen as normal and part of the ageing process. This creates a mindset that these conditions in older people are not really mental illnesses at all.

This results in a failure to diagnose mental illnesses and reluctance to treat them aggressively in older people. It also results in apathy towards intervening and assisting older people with these conditions.

This mindset has resulted in a lack of development of a coherent national strategy towards the treatment and provision of services to older people with mental illnesses. The Ministry of Health and Mental Health Commission have no clear strategy on these issues at this point in time.

The second myth is that if a mental illness does occur in an older person, it cannot be treated or that person is unlikely to respond to treatment. Research however has shown that this is not true. Elderly people are just as likely to respond to treatments for depression, psychosis and other psychological problems as younger people. Older people often require lower doses.

In addition to this, older people are more resilient and able to cope with adversities than young people (because of their life experience and learned coping strategies.) Depressive illnesses associated with severe medical problems such as stroke or with bereavement have been known to respond to medical and psychological treatment, often with excellent results. In addition to this, the illnesses associated with old age such as Alzheimers Disease are also now able to be treated, as are many of the complications of these illnesses.

The Taranaki Health Mental Health Services for the Elderly Team are excellent clinicians and very dedicated to their work. They are able to provide a service as good as any in the world and have been able to introduce all new innovations in the treatment of mental illnesses in the elderly as soon as they have become available. Taranaki is also lucky to have a wide range of providers of other health services for older people. The quality of these services is generally excellent and is likely to continue to improve over time.

Gordon Hudson, Manager, Like Minds Taranaki