



**Independent
Age**



Minds that matter

Understanding mental health
in later life

Executive summary

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The challenges that affect people's mental health in later life

Mental health problems can affect people of any age. While many take a proactive approach to protect and bolster their own mental health, including seeing friends and family, volunteering, and engaging with community groups, others experience significant problems.

"I do feel down quite a lot. Sometimes I don't speak to anybody for over a week and I don't see anyone. I don't hear a human voice. You feel a bit down then." William, 81

As a charity that provides information, advice and friendship services to people aged 65+, we know that growing older can be accompanied by hard times, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the challenges people already faced.

Life events or experiences such as bereavement, financial worries, caring responsibilities, physical illness, retirement, broken relationships, trauma or abuse can all have an impact on someone's mental wellbeing.

"If you're bereaved and living on your own, there's no reassurance and you've only yourself to rely on to pull yourself up. As you get older, you do start to worry about things a lot more and, when you're home alone, this can exacerbate these issues." Anonymous

In our polling, three quarters (75%) of people aged 65+ said they have experienced significant anxiety or low mood at least once since turning 65, with 1 in 10 (10%) saying they feel this frequently or all the time.³

People's experiences of seeking mental health support

The people we spoke to shared both positive and negative experiences when accessing and receiving mental health support, but our polling showed that only 1 in 8 (12%) people aged 65+ believed that 'older people are given the support they need to manage their mental health'.⁴

Health and care professionals

For many people, speaking to their GP was their first step. We heard about the importance of building up a relationship of trust with doctors, alongside the challenges of getting an appointment quickly and the frustration of only being offered limited treatment options.

Talking therapies

People shared their positive experiences of talking therapies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy or counselling, and how this treatment had improved their lives. However, we also heard about long waiting times, a lack of choice in the type of therapy offered, and the cost people faced for private therapy when they felt they had no option but to pay for this support.

The most recent annual data for the NHS's Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme in England shows that people aged 65+ still only make up a relatively small proportion of clients – just 6%. But the data also highlights some geographical areas that have higher referrals for people aged 65+.⁵ In our polling, only half (54%) of people aged 65+ were aware of the option to receive 'counselling or talking therapy' through the NHS.⁶

Our recommendations for action

Our recommendations to improve the support for people in later life reflect long-running challenges. However, they also need to be managed in the context of the additional pressures brought about by COVID-19.



I do feel down quite a lot. Sometimes I don't speak to anybody for over a week and I don't see anyone. I don't hear a human voice. You feel a bit down then.

William, 81

Where possible, our recommendations suggest improvement across the UK, but some of the specific programmes we reviewed, such as the IAPT programme, only exist in England and our recommendations reflect this.

Support from health professionals

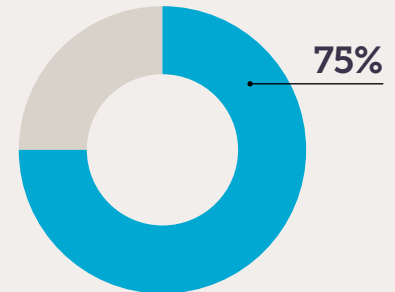
Independent Age recommends that:

- GPs across the UK should be supported to consistently offer people in later life a range of mental health treatment and support options, including medication, talking therapy, and social or community activities
- GPs and talking therapy commissioners and providers in England should use the NHS's *Older People: Positive Practice Guide* to signpost older people to NHS England's IAPT programme. NHS England should promote this guidance to these groups of professionals
- the NHS, across the nations, should review the barriers to, and the feasibility of, increasing the flexibility of GP appointment lengths for specific patients with mental health problems.

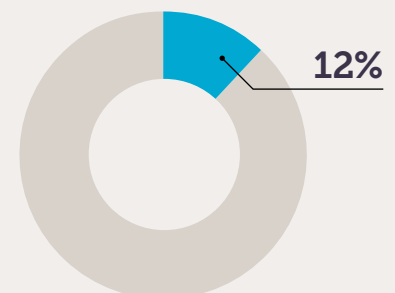
Access to talking therapy

Independent Age recommends that:

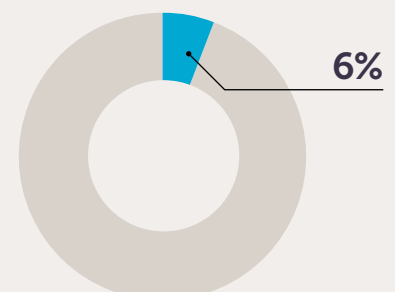
- the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and Clinical Commissioning Groups review the current barriers to accessing IAPT for people aged 65+ and develop innovative actions, including targeted communication plans, to increase the number of people in later life who receive this treatment
- the NHS, in every nation, publishes data on older people's take-up of talking therapy, including age breakdowns within the 65+ category
- NHS England reviews local areas where access to IAPT services is higher for people aged 65+ and proactively shares best-practice examples with Clinical Commissioning Groups
- talking therapy providers offer choice and flexibility to clients, for example, individual or group therapy, face-to-face or remote therapy
- GPs, social prescribing link workers, and other health and care professionals signpost older people to talking therapy services provided by the third sector.



75% of people aged 65+ said they have experienced significant anxiety or low mood at least once since turning 65



1 in 8 (12%) people aged 65+ believed that 'older people are given the support they need to manage their mental health'



People aged 65+ still only make up a relatively small proportion of IAPT clients – just 6%

Increased bereavement support

Independent Age recommends that:

- the Department of Health and Social Care undertakes a review of bereavement needs, for example, commissioning an expanded version of the 2015 National Survey of Bereaved People (VOICES) in England
- training providers review the bereavement resources and training on offer to health and care professionals and, if gaps are highlighted, work with professional bodies and charities to increase what's available.

Increased public awareness

Independent Age recommends that:

- the NHS and public health bodies, across the nations, investigate what prevents many older people discussing mental health and seeking treatment. They should use these findings to develop innovative ways to target information, including about treatment options, to people aged 65+ at key points in their life, such as when going through relationship breakdown or experiencing bereavement
- public health campaigns, such as Every Mind Matters, ensure people in later life are fully represented.

Increased support for carers

Independent Age recommends that:

- local authorities proactively promote to older carers their entitlement to a carer's assessment and support
- local authorities ensure that all carers in their area are told about the availability of respite care and day centres
- the Department for Work and Pensions raise awareness to carers of State Pension age about the 'underlying entitlement' to Carer's Allowance, and provide clear information on how this can be used to apply for means-tested benefits.



If you're bereaved and living on your own, there's no reassurance and you've only yourself to rely on to pull yourself up. As you get older, you do start to worry about things a lot more and, when you're home alone, this can exacerbate these issues.

Anonymous

Endnotes

1. UK online poll of 2,316 people. Conducted by Opinium, Independent Age, July 2020.
2. UK online poll of 2,316 people. Conducted by Opinium, Independent Age, July 2020.
3. UK online poll of 2,316 people. Conducted by Opinium, Independent Age, July 2020.
4. UK online poll of 2,316 people. Conducted by Opinium, Independent Age, July 2020.
5. "Psychological Therapies, Annual report on the use of IAPT services 2019–20." NHS Digital, 30 July 2020, <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/psychological-therapies-annual-reports-on-the-use-of-iapt-services/annual-report-2019-20>
6. UK online poll of 2,316 people. Conducted by Opinium, Independent Age, July 2020.

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