

Experiences of older people with severe anxiety or depression

- Approximately 3% of older people in England have severe anxiety or depression. Approximately 12% have moderate / severe anxiety or depression.
- This means there are approximately 300,000 older people with severe anxiety or depression, and 1.2m older people with moderate / severe anxiety or depression in the general English population.

This briefing summarises findings from a project undertaken by Independent Age to explore the experiences of specific groups of older people.

This is one of a series of six briefings based on findings from 45 interviews with older people in 2019 and analysis of data from the *Understanding Society* survey. It focuses on England only.

This briefing focuses on older people with severe anxiety or depression. In our quantitative work, we defined this group using the measurements from the SF-12 questionnaire¹.

Health and wellbeing

A hidden burden

- In our interviews, we found that those placing a great deal of pressure or burden on themselves, particularly carers, were feeling the impact of mental health issues most keenly. Many felt that they had no one to confide in.
- Mental health issues could present unique problems as people got older. For example, panic attacks become harder to manage and more dangerous when physically weaker due to age.
- We can see from our data that older people with severe mental anxiety or depression are more likely to be disadvantaged across different measures of health and wellbeing than the average older person, particularly physical health.
- The interaction between physical and mental health is clear from the data. Older people with severe anxiety or depression were more than three times as likely to struggle with their physical health than those without (Figure 1).
- This could have major impacts on those with physical and mental health needs. For example, one participant found asking the council for adaptations to her home so stressful that she eventually gave up, even though she was entitled to them.
- Also clear was the relationship between severe anxiety or depression and full-time caring. Older people with severe anxiety or depression are almost three times as likely to be caring full time (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Accomplished less due to physical health

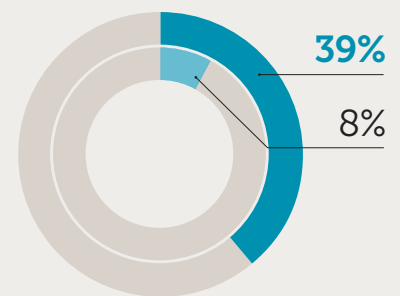
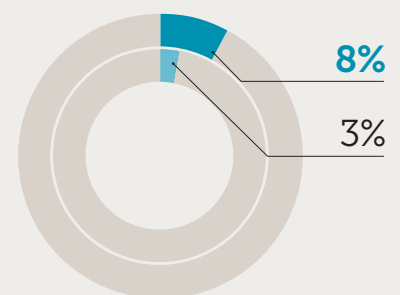


Figure 2: Caring for others full time



- Older people with severe mental health issues
- All older people



Things have changed rapidly in the past few years. My physical health has deteriorated, so I have to walk with sticks, and this has affected me emotionally.

Oliver, 72

¹ The SF-12 is a multipurpose suite of 12 questions designed to measure mental and physical functioning. The questions on mental health focus on feelings of anxiety or depression. It uses four subcategories: no health problem; mild health problem; moderate health problem; and severe health problem.

Financial security

Financial stress

- Interview participants who were on a low income and with mental health issues appeared worse off. In these situations, there appeared to be a lack of communication about their mental health, as well as a lack of access to wellbeing options (both financially and geographically).
- We found that financial decisions caused particularly high stress when participants were already feeling depressed or anxious.
- Our statistics confirm that older people with severe anxiety or depression are more likely to be worse off compared to the average older person. Around 1 in 10 find it quite or very difficult to get by financially, and 1 in 5 are mostly or completely dissatisfied with household income. These figures are almost three times higher than those for older people without severe anxiety or depression.
- People with severe anxiety or depression are also more likely to be claiming benefits, and be unable to pay an unexpected expense.

Social connectedness

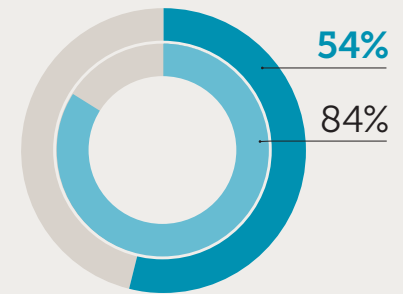
Disconnection and disillusionment

- We found that participants with mental health issues were less likely to go out, with their isolation compounding their poor mental health. Isolation due to mental health could also contribute to health issues (Figure 3).
- Participants in this subgroup struggled to connect with the relevant authorities that may be able to help. The administrative load of dealing with bodies such as the council for housing, mobility and benefits was often simply too much to manage.
- Our data shows us that older people with a severe mental problem tend to be less socially connected than the average older person.
- They are more likely to:
 - have few close friends
 - not go out socially due to their health
 - be less engaged within their community and politically
 - not see their children.

A different vocabulary

- We found that older people often don't use the language of mental health, anxiety or depression.
- They were unlikely to speak out about the problem and ask for help beyond medication. Accessing counselling for some was considered a sign of weakness – something that goes against the 'make do' attitude.
- However, several older people we spoke to emphasised the importance of a 'positive mental attitude' to them, and clearly were finding comfort in this mindset.

Figure 3: Likelihood of going out socially



- Older people with severe mental health issues
- All older people



I was on the phone trying to find out what money my son could claim... I was told to phone a lot of different departments. It was stressful... it's a hell of a game.

Shirley, 73



How to find out more

You can read our in-depth report and other briefings on physical health, low income, carers, black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) older people, and older people without children at independentage.org/in-focus