MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DISORDERS IN OLDER ADULTS

Only the mental health disorders that most affect older adults will be discussed in this chapter.

LATE LIFE DEPRESSION

Depression is the most frequently occurring mental illness in older adults. Late life depression may be due to a number of changes such as: the loss of a spouse, the loss of peers, social isolation, stress of concurrent illnesses, retirement, the loss of one’s home, and drug interactions. With normal aging there is a decline of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine. This decline may serve as a vulnerability factor for biological depression.67

Suicide rates rise in late life adults. Clinical depression is a co-factor in at least 70% of these cases. Each year approximately 6,000 elderly individuals take their lives (approximately 17 per day). White males age 80 and over have the highest suicide rate.67 Risk factors for suicide include: being male, being widowed or divorced, increasing in age, being socially isolated, abusing alcohol or drugs, impulsive character trait, chronic disease, and the perception of hopelessness (i.e., the individual believes that he or she will never get well).67

The essential characteristic of a major depressive episode is a period of at least 2 weeks duration in which there is a loss of interest or pleasure in almost all activities and/or a depressed mood.68 The client must also experience at least four additional changes in the following areas:68,69