



Aging and mental health: What matters most to Canadians?

The impact of age-related changes on the mental health of Canadians is not widely known or understood. We worked together with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), older adults, family caregivers and health and social care providers to find out what matters most to Canadians on the topic of aging and mental health to guide future research.

“Identifying priorities for aging-focused mental health research with aging Canadians is an important step but just the beginning. We have a responsibility as scientists to conduct research that meaningfully responds to these priorities and brings funding and policy attention towards inclusive and holistic mental health support care and treatment.”



- Dr. Justine Giosa, Executive Director and Scientific Director, SE Research Centre

Project Overview

Age-related changes (e.g., loss of social roles, retirement, living alone, bereavement, and physical and mental health conditions) can negatively impact our overall mental health¹ — our *“positive sense of well-being, or the capacity to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face”*.²

While the topic of aging is a globally recognized health research priority, there is a major gap in aging focused mental health research. To better understand the needs of the diverse growing population of older adults in Canada, we need to learn more about the role and significance of age-related changes on mental health.

This collaboration was originally brainstormed by the SE Research Centre and Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in 2018, with a combined vision to authentically engage older adults, family caregivers and health and social care providers in the identification of an aging-focused mental health research agenda. The project was guided by a steering group composed of older adults, caregivers, and members of aging and mental health organizations

from across Canada. Steering group members met monthly to review upcoming project activities and provide feedback and suggestions on how best to engage and incorporate the perspectives of all Canadians.

Together with Canadians, we identified a top 10 list of unanswered questions related to aging and mental health support, care, and treatment, defined as follows:

- **Support:** focuses on the information, resources, and services meant to communicate to, educate, or connect people on the topic of mental health;
- **Care:** looks at the services focused on protecting and promoting the individual abilities and strengths of anyone experiencing poor mental health;
- **Treatment:** refers to medical and professional interventions used to cure or alleviate symptoms of a diagnosed mental health illness.

Recognizing that significant research is already taking place across Canada on the topic of dementias, including a recent Canadian Dementia Priority Setting Partnership,³ these topics were excluded from this initiative.

What have we done?

As part of our portfolio investigating Aging in Society, we used a modified James Lind Alliance Approach to priority setting partnerships⁴ and worked together with older adults, caregivers, and health and social care providers through:

- Monthly steering group meetings;
- A national survey to identify Canadians' broad questions and concerns around support, care and treatment;
- A rapid review of evidence published in the last 10 years to categorize questions as either answered, or partially/ completely unanswered;
- A second national survey to identify a short list of priority questions;
- A series of 4 online workshops to prioritize and rank order the final list of 10 unanswered questions and discuss challenges and opportunities for dissemination.

What did we find?

Across two national surveys and four online workshops, over 1,000 survey responses were gathered and 52 workshop participants were engaged.

- Survey 1 led to the identification of 40+ questions on aging and mental health; 25 of which were unanswered and put forward in Survey 2;
- Survey 2 led to refining the list of 25 questions to a shorter list of 18 questions, prioritizing questions most frequently selected as important by respondents overall and individuals in under-represented groups (e.g., adults 76 years of age and older, men, non-Caucasian individuals, and those who live outside of Ontario);
- Workshops 1-3 involved small groups of older adults, caregivers, and health and social care providers, and Workshop 4 involved a large mixed perspective group. Participants in each workshop worked together to discuss and generate a ranked list of their 10 priority questions. The final list of 10 unanswered questions (scan/click the QR code under **To learn more about this work**) was

generated by combining the lists from all 4 workshops.

What are the next steps?

We are sharing the aging-focused mental health research priorities widely. This includes 1) an in-press publication, 2) formalizing the Canadian Aging Action, Research, and Education (CAARE) for Mental Health Group, and 3) an action-oriented project focused on co-designing mental health conversations between aging Canadians and health and social care providers in the community.

How is this research funded and supported?

This work was funded and supported by SE Health, one of Canada's largest social enterprises, and the Canadian Mental Health Association.

To learn more about this work

Top 10 Unanswered Research Questions on Aging & Mental Health in Canada



SE Research Centre's Aging & Mental Health Initiatives

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References

