

Aging and Mental Health: What Research Priorities Matter Most to Canadians?

The impact of age-related changes on the mental health of Canadians is poorly 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.

Through a series of national surveys (1000 responses total) and online workshops (52 participants) we identified the top 10 unanswered research questions on aging and mental health according to Canadians. Now, we are sharing this list widely to promote research and action on aging and mental health in Canada.

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. We need to learn more about the role and significance of age-related changes on mental health in order to better understand the needs of the diverse and growing population of older adults in Canada.

This collaboration was originally brainstormed by the SE Research Centre and Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) in 2018, with a 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. It is

guided by a steering group composed of older adults, caregivers, and members of aging and mental health organizations from across Canada. Steering group members meet monthly to review upcoming activities and provide feedback and suggestions on how best to engage and incorporate the perspectives of Canadians.

Together with Canadians, we identified the top 10 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 Partnership³, these topics were excluded from this initiative.

What did we do?

This initiative used a modified James Lind Alliance Approach to priority setting partnerships⁴ to work 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 virtual 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 1000 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 key 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 (see pg. 3) was generated by combining the lists from all 4 workshops.

What is the impact?

Working with our partners and interested individuals we will:

- Share this list widely to help prioritize an aging-focused mental health research agenda;
- Develop research projects to begin answering 1 or more of the questions; and
- Promote action on the known, evidence-based answers to questions identified from Survey 1.

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About the SE Research Centre

The SE Research Centre is funded by SE Health to conduct impact-oriented health services research and evaluation for the benefit of Canadians. We study the needs of people, their caregivers, and health care providers, to develop evidence-based solutions to tough health and social care problems. Our researchers collaborate with a wide variety of community and academic partners across Canada. In the SE Research Centre there are four fields of research and evaluation: Aging in Society; Dying, Death and Grief; Health and Care Experiences; and Models of Care Delivery.

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Top 10 Unanswered Questions on Aging & Mental Health in Canada

This list is a result of collaborative efforts from the SE Research Centre, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), and individuals and organizations from across Canada. It was developed and prioritized from over 1000 survey responses, a rapid literature review, and steering group meetings. It was then ranked through a series of workshops with 52 participants representing older adult, caregiver, & health or social care provider perspectives.

1. How can health care providers who are not mental health specialists build their skills for providing mental health care to older adults? (e.g., family doctors, personal support workers, nurses, rehabilitation therapists etc.)
2. What type of support minimizes the mental health impacts of loneliness for those who are socially isolated?
3. How can older adults and caregivers better access mental health care when they need it? (e.g., location, cost, technology)
4. What does person-centered mental health care look like for older adults? (e.g., meeting individual needs and preferences)
5. What are the challenges and opportunities for using technology to provide mental health support and care to older adults?
6. What mental health care is needed by older adults during care transitions? (e.g., from hospital to home, from home to long-term care)
7. How can mental health care providers be better protected from burnout when providing care for older adults?
8. How can mental health care planning better include the perspectives of family caregivers? (e.g., shared decision-making)
9. What financial supports or resources are most useful to older adults who cannot afford mental health care?
10. What health and social care services are most needed by caregivers of older adults with mental health issues?