

Suicide and the Older Adult

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MYTHS

- Most older people on fixed incomes just don't have the money to get really involved in gambling.
- Older persons don't get out much, so they are not likely to get into trouble when gambling

(Nova Scotia – Office of Health Promotion – Problem Gambling)

- Very little attention in research has looked at the impact of problem gambling upon older adults
- However, McNeilly notes that “some retirees – especially those vulnerable to depression --- from changes and losses that can occur in aging, casino gambling can become a virulent and destructive addiction” “for most older adults, casino gambling is a new form of excitement and entertainment.” (McNeilly 2005)

- Many senior citizens centers send buses out to various activities, and one of the places they go is to gamble – many turn to casino to stave off loneliness (Zoellner, 2002).
- Significant public health concerns that gambling and at-risk gambling are prevalent in older man and women... although many older adults view gambling as harmless entertainment and participate in some form of gambling without significant problems, a significant minority suffers disastrous consequences (McDuffie, 2004).

- Elderly gamblers were just as likely as the younger gamblers to have a lifetime history of suicidal ideation. They were equally likely as the younger cohort to carry a psychiatric diagnosis, and depression was the most common diagnosis (Kausch, 2004).

Geriatric Suicide

- Suicide among seniors poses a major public health problem.

A Public Health Perspective

- Seniors 65 years and older have among the highest suicide rates of all age groups in many countries worldwide (De Leo & Ormskerk, 1991), including Canada and the United States (McIntosh et al., 1994; Statistics Canada, 1997)

A Public Health Perspective

- Older adults have high rates of suicide
- In 1997, 452 Canadian seniors (65+) died by suicide, yielding a suicide rate of 12.4/100,000
- This rate equals that of adolescents (12.9), but accounts for nearly twice as many deaths

- Every death by suicide leaves an estimated 6 or more survivors.
- Societal effects include loss of one's contribution, cost of mental healthcare for survivors, and recognition that we have not protected someone in need and in pain.

- As a cohort, the “baby boomers” carry a high risk for suicide (Moscicki, 1996)
- The number of suicides among older adults may thus increase in coming years (Haas & Hendin, 1983).
- However, baby boomers are quite effective in making their needs known, which might increase mental health service provision and decrease their rates of suicide.

Suicide Risk Factors

- Gender (Male)
- Age (Elderly)
- Race (Caucasian/White)

- Assess for:
 - death ideation
 - suicide ideation
 - presence of a suicide plan
 - self-destructive behaviour
(past, current, and family/friends)
 - access to lethal means

Modifiable Risk Factors

- Mental Illness
 - Mood disorders
 - Substance use disorders
 - Anxiety disorders
 - Psychotic disorders
 - Comorbidity

Modifiable Risk Factors

- Adjustment to Life Transitions and Loss
 - Negative life events (Rubenowitz et al, 2001)
 - Financial problems (Rubenowitz)
 - Perceived physical illness (Duberstein et al., 2004)
 - Family discord and separation (Duberstein)
 - Change in employment (Duberstein)

Modifiable Risk Factors

- Poor social integration/support and conflict
 - Being unmarried
 - Living far from relatives
 - Bereavement
 - Non-attendance of religious services

Suicide Warning Signs

• **Communication**

- talks about “the end”
- makes vague references to not being around much longer
- talks a great deal about death (longingly, glorifies death)
- refers to self as a burden/better off dead
- discusses suicidal intent or plan

Suicide Warning Signs

• Behaviour

- gives away prized possessions
- makes plans related to death
- stockpiles pills, knives, ropes, or other such implements
- ceases taking medication or food
- appears depressed, or, if having been depressed, suddenly appears brighter, more energetic, calm