

Aging and Trauma

What is Trauma?

Individual trauma is a result of an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that can be sudden or drawn out, which present physical or emotional harm to an individual, or are life threatening. Traumatic events may have lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.¹

90%

of adults in the United States have been exposed to a least one traumatic event in their lifetimes. Exposure to multiple traumatic events throughout an individual's lifetime is common.²

What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is a mental health condition that may develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event resulting in heightened and prolonged stress response.³

8,000,000

adults in the United States experience Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) each year, equivalent to the population of the state of Virginia.^{4,5}

Trauma in Older Adults

Trauma does not discriminate based on age – trauma can occur to individuals of all ages and can impact individuals throughout their lifetime. Symptoms associated with traumatic stress may not dissipate over time for all survivors. As trauma survivors age, their trauma symptoms can resurface and evolve.^{6,7,8}

- Symptoms of trauma can evolve after long symptom-free periods
- Reemergence of trauma symptoms after symptom-free periods is not uncommon
- Symptoms of trauma can emerge for the first time during older adulthood - decades after exposure to traumatic events
- Symptoms of trauma emerging in older adulthood can be more extreme than previously experienced

One study found that male survivors of childhood sexual abuse experienced higher levels of depressive symptoms in their fifties, sixties, and seventies compared to men without that history.⁹

One study found that female survivors of physical or sexual assault earlier in life report continued and significant levels of PTSD well into older adulthood.¹⁰

Trauma Resurgence in Older Adults

Traumatic stress symptoms can persist and reemerge in older adulthood as this is a phase of social, financial, and physical change. These changes can trigger a traumatic stress response even for those who had previously been coping well.^{11,12,13} As trauma survivors age, their trauma symptoms can resurface and evolve as a result of major life changes such as,

change in
familial roles

beginning of
retirement

emergence of
health problems

loss of
independence

loss of
loved ones

Coping mechanisms previously used to deal with trauma triggers or symptoms may no longer be available or possible. These coping mechanisms include socialization with professional networks and physical activities such as exercise.



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Trauma and Health are Linked

An individual's trauma exposure is linked to their propensity for developing a wide range of conditions that can negatively impact their health. Older adult trauma survivors are especially vulnerable as their trauma history can result in high rates of physical, mental, and cognitive decline.

Trauma and Brain Health

Traumatic events can affect various areas of the brain and can lead to lasting changes in neurological response resulting in persistent traumatic stress symptoms. These symptoms can include constant fear, hypervigilance, and difficulties sleeping, concentrating, thinking clearly, and regulating emotions.²³

Trauma and Dementia

Traumatic events are associated with an increased likelihood of trauma survivors to develop dementia in older adulthood. Additionally, older adults with a history of trauma may experience worsening of trauma symptoms with the onset of dementia.^{24, 25, 26}

2X Veterans with PTSD are twice as likely to develop dementia in older adulthood compared to veterans without PTSD.²⁷



Trauma is associated with the following health conditions:^{14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22}

Physical Health



- Lung disease
- Gum disease
- Fibromyalgia
- Chronic fatigue
- Cardiovascular disease
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Endocrine disorders
- Reproductive disorders

Mental Health



- Anxiety
- Depression
- Suicidal Ideation
- Mood Disorders
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse

Cognitive Health



- Dementia
- Sleep Disorders
- Cognitive Impairments

The Difficulty of Uncovering Trauma History in Older Adults

Older adult survivors of trauma may have trouble seeking help with trauma symptoms or associated health consequences because,^{28, 29, 30, 31}

- Older adults may not see the role of trauma in their health
- Older adults may fear the stigma associated with their trauma history
- Healthcare providers may not recognize the signs or symptoms of trauma in older adults
- Healthcare providers may not know how to provide treatment for trauma symptoms
- Trauma symptoms in older adults can present differently than in younger individuals or be masked by other health conditions
- Trauma survivors have limited access to person-centered, trauma-informed care.



Seeking Help Can Retraumatize

Older adults with a history of trauma are often misdiagnosed and receive inappropriate treatment

Providing medical history and revealing trauma histories may retraumatize survivors

Residents of long-term care facilities may be retraumatized by the way in which they are treated



Sources

Want to know more?

Visit our website
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