

Seniors Mental Health:  
*A Health Care Workers Perspective*

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For:



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION

L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE

***Seniors Mental Health: A Health Care Workers Perspective***

*A research study conducted via the Canadian Mental Health Association, with the support of Eastern Health, Avalon District.*



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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore, with health care professionals, levels of knowledge and awareness regarding senior's mental health issues. Our intention was to identify whether or not health care professionals feel it would be helpful/beneficial to have access to additional information/educational resources in their area. Our objective has been to bring forth recommendations to CMHA concerning professional development for health care workers, as a means to maximize services provided to the aging population.

33 health care staff members, from various rural Eastern Health facilities and professions, were interviewed for inclusion in this study. Interviews took place in several different locations, within a variety of health care settings, which included the following:

- 3 Long Term Care Facilities
- 2 Acute Care Facilities
- 2 Personal Care Homes
- 3 Professionals working within the community

Preparation for this study included research, review of existing literature, the development of a Research Cover letter, and the assemblage of interview questions. The Cover letter and Interview

questions were reviewed, and approved, by the Executive Director for CMHA. A copy of the Cover letter and Interview questions was also offered to participants of a Seniors Mental Health Roundtable Meeting for the purpose of consultation and guidance. Participants of this Seniors Mental Health Roundtable Meeting included various professionals who work, or have worked, with the senior population.

Based at the Carbonear General Hospital for 3 ½ weeks, we were able to connect with various professionals at the different sites in the Conception Bay North and Placentia area. We then scheduled and coordinated interviews with willing participants.

### **Demographics**

The following table depicts the 33 participating professionals we interviewed within the various rural health care facilities included in this study.

	Long Term Care	Acute Care	Personal Care Home	Community
Nursing	2	8	0	1
LPN	4	3	0	0
Personal Care Attendants	0	0	2	0
Management	2	0	2	0
Social Work	2	2*	0	1
Occupational Therapy	1	1	0	1
Physiotherapy	0	1	0	0
Dietetics	1	1*	0	0

\* 1  
Social

Worker and 1 Dietician are represented twice in the table as they work within both Long Term Care and Acute Care.

### **Interview Responses**

#### **1. (a) How long have you been in your profession?**

Agency	Occupation	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	26-30+
<b>Long Term Care</b>	Nursing	-	-	1	-	-	1
	LPN	1	1	1	2	-	-
	Social Work	-	1	-	-	-	1
	Management	1	-	1	-	-	-
	Dietician	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Occupational T.	1	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Acute Care</b>	Nursing	1	-	1	2	-	4
	LPN	1	-	-	-	-	2
	Social Work	1	1	-	-	-	-
	Occupational T.	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Physiotherapy	1	-	-	-	-	-
	Dietician	-	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Personal Care Home</b>	Personal Care	2	-	-	-	-	-
	Attendant	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Management	1	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Community</b>	Nursing	-	-	-	-	1	-
	Occupational T.	-	-	-	-	-	1
	Social Work	-	1	-	-	-	-

**(b) How long have you been working with Seniors?**

- Of the 33 professionals we interviewed, 78% had worked with seniors for the entirety of their careers. The other 21% had worked with other populations before entering their current positions working with seniors.

**2. Describe your level of knowledge pertaining to Seniors' Mental Health (including post-secondary education, training, work experience).**

- Only 6 out of 33 interviewees reported having received formal training on Seniors Mental Health during their respective academic years.
- 36% of interviewees reported that their knowledge pertaining to Seniors Mental Health has been obtained from both work experience and continuing education (i.e. workshops, in-services, professional presentations).
- 63% of interviewees reported that their knowledge pertaining to seniors mental Health has been obtained solely through work experience.

3. (a) **Have you had any experience working with seniors experiencing mental health issues/illnesses (such as Depression, Anxiety, Schizophrenia, etc)?**

- All 33 interviewees reported having had experience working with seniors with mental health issues/illnesses at some point in their career.

(b) **If Yes, Please Describe.**

- The majority of interviewees indicated that they worked more often with seniors diagnosed with Anxiety and Depression, as opposed to Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder.
- A large Percentage of interviewees reported encountering Situational Depression more often than Clinical Depression in Seniors.
- Although we were inquiring about mental illnesses such as Depression, Anxiety, Schizophrenia, and Bipolar, all interviewees noted that Alzheimer's and Dementia was more common among seniors with whom they worked.

4. **Describe your level of comfort working with seniors experiencing mental health issues/illnesses.**

- 93% of Interviewees reported that they were comfortable working with seniors experiencing mental health issues/illnesses.
- Of the 93%, comfort levels ranged from fairly comfortable to very comfortable, with only a small number of interviewees feeling very comfortable.
- A large number of interviewees stated that, while they are comfortable on some level, an increased level of knowledge and/or experience would allow them to feel an even greater level of comfort.

5. (a) **Do you feel that you have adequate access to resources (i.e. Literature, seminars, in-services, workshops, presentations, educational media, etc.) regarding seniors' mental health?**

- 78% of interviewees reported that they **DO Not** feel they have adequate access to resources regarding Seniors Mental Health.
- 21% of interviewees reported that they **Do** feel that have adequate access to resources regarding Seniors Mental Health.

(b) **What have these resources been and through what medium have they been offered?**

- The 21% of interviewees who felt they have adequate access to resources regarding Seniors Mental Health reported access to workshops, in-services, seminars, and presentations offered through their workplace and/or Eastern Health.

**6. (a) Do you feel that you would benefit from an increased access to mental health resources?**

- 100% of interviewees reported that they would benefit from increased access to mental health resources regarding Seniors Mental Health.

**(b) In what ways would this benefit your work with seniors?**

The following is a compiled list of responses from the 33 interviewees who participated in the study:

- Increased understanding of mental illness, specifically within the context of the senior population
- Be more open to, and comfortable in, working with people experiencing mental illness/issues
- Increased quality of life for patients, residents, and senior mental health consumers
- Better equipped to recognize the presence of, and assess individual needs/risks related to, mental health
- Better able to effectively meet each patient's/resident's individual care needs
- Better understanding of, and sensitivity toward, what a patient/resident is experiencing
- Become more open to what is beyond the physical needs of a patient/resident
- Knowledge regarding how to effectively approach and/or provide care for patients/residents experiencing mental health issues or illnesses
- Increased understanding of physical conditions and their link to mental health
- Better understanding of a patient's capabilities and limitations
- Aid in the prevention of misdiagnosis or under-diagnosis of mental health issues/illnesses
- Confronting issues of ageism (i.e. "he is just old and senile")- normal aging vs. mental health issues/illness
- Broader knowledge base
- Increased understanding of families perspectives and needs, ability to answer their questions regarding their loved ones condition, increased support for families

- Better patient-worker-family communication
- Increased knowledge of proper treatment options
- Pro-active approach to care
- Up to date information on illnesses, treatments, and interventions
- Know where to turn /how to help seniors experiencing mental health issues/illnesses
- Enable the creation of specific agency based resources for patients and their families
- Possible development of senior mental health services in local areas, as opposed to having to transport the elderly into St. John's
- Helping both residents and co-workers cope with particular issues (work or personally related)
- Better equipped to attend to specific situations that present in the workplace
- A more comfortable work environment
- Increased productivity, decrease in time lost seeking out resources that are not readily available
- Keeps the issue of mental health/illness current, and clear in your mind

**7. (a) Through your professional, what types of resources would best suit the needs of yourself and your colleagues?**

**Nursing**

- Of the 11 Nurses who were interviewed, the vast majority reported workshops as their preferred educational resource.
- In-services and a mental health contact person ranked second to workshops.
- Very few Nursing professionals reported literature as their preferred resource.

**LPN**

- Of the 7 LPN's who were interviewed, the majority reported workshops and/or a combination of resources as their preferred educational resource. In our study, a "combination of resources" includes workshops, presentations, in-services, and literature.

### **Personal Care Attendant**

- One of the 2 Personal Care Attendants reported workshops and educational media as a preferred educational resource, while the other PCA reported that a combination of educational resources was preferred.

### **Social Work**

- Of the 4 Social Workers who were interviewed, the majority reported workshops as the preferred educational resource.
- Presentations and literature ranked second to workshops.

### **Management**

- Of the 4 managers who were interviewed, the majority reported workshops as the preferred educational resource.
- Educational media ranked second to workshops.

### **Physiotherapy**

- The Physiotherapist who was interviewed reported workshops and literature as the preferred educational resource.

### **Occupational Therapy**

- 2 of the 3 Occupational Therapists who were interviewed reported a combination of educational resources as a preference.
- The Third OT who was interviewed reported in-services as the preferred educational resource.

### **Dietetics**

- The Dietitian who was interviewed reported workshops and literature as the preferred educational resource.

**(b) If such resources were made available to you, do you feel that you would access them?**

- 100% of interviewees reported that they would access educational resources that were made available to them.

## **Additional Staff Comments, Recommendations, and Concerns**

- Staffing is an issue when it comes to attending seminars or workshops- specific concern for Nursing and LPN staff because their positions always require coverage.
- Workshops need to be shorter, and offered multiple times (more than once) to provide an increased opportunity for staff to attend.
- A concern for Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, and Dietitians, is that they are often not invited to, or offered, workshops/sessions on mental health, because their area of work is focused more toward the physical aspect of health. They have expressed that they would like to be invited to/made aware of such workshops as it would aid them in their work with patients who are experiencing mental health issues/illness.
- Personal care attendants, who work in Personal Care Homes, are not invited to workshops/information sessions offered by Eastern Health (which is often the only means of access to such resources). Even though Eastern Health regulates Personal Care Homes, their staff there is not included in professional development opportunities.
- Staff concerns for the general lack of public awareness concerning mental health issues and illnesses.
- Community Health Nurses are not provided coverage in their absence; therefore they are unable to attend education sessions/presentations when, and if, they are offered.
- There needs to be greater promotion regarding mental illness and mental health within the general public, and professional organizations.
- There needs to be more professionals trained in gerontology.
- There is a need to have psychiatric services for seniors living in areas outside of St. John's. Transportation to a large center, often a long distance away, can be very difficult for the elderly, specifically those experiencing a mental illness.
- Educational development opportunities should be offered more frequently in rural areas so staff does not always have to travel to St. John's.
- In long-term care facilities, nurses and LPN's do not have access to the Internet at their stations, which hinders their ability to research information on mental health/illness if needed.
- Financial cost of workshops can be an issue for some staff members, i.e. registration fees (this includes the possible need for travel to an urban area).

- Mental health resources are often targeted toward people closest to the mental health field, when in fact it is those who are least familiar with the topic that may benefit the most.
- Difficult to get leave from work to attend workshops when they are not specific to physical health or your profession (i.e. OT, PT, etc.)

## **Recommendations for CMHA**

The interviews conducted with health care staff proved to be very eye-opening and informative. While many important points were raised, three key points have been very significant in the development of our recommendations. Firstly, based on our interviews it is evident that Health Care staff working with the elderly do not feel knowledgeable and/or well equipped to work with mentally ill seniors. Secondly, it has also been found that many workers feel they have not been adequately provided with the opportunity for professional development and learning in the area of seniors mental health. Lastly, all interviewees felt that they would, in some way, benefit from an increased access to educational opportunities within the realm of seniors mental health.

The senior population is on the rise across Canada, and particularly in Newfoundland and Labrador. This growing cohort of people are in need of better services, specifically within the realm of mental health. Health Care staff working with the senior population have shown an interest and willingness to expand their levels of knowledge in the area of seniors mental health, as a means to provide better care and increase the quality of life for the elderly people they serve.

The following recommendations have been developed through an analysis of the professional needs expressed by the Health Care staff we have interviewed:

- Expand the research study provincially to gain a wider perspective on the educational needs of health care staff.
- The development of a Workshop by CMHA for use with a variety of health care staff, who work with the senior population:
  - The Workshop should consist of a series of topics related to seniors' mental health.

- An interactive workshop, including the use of media tools and an information package.
  - The Workshop material should be user friendly so that it can be distributed to agencies across the province. By distributing the workshop material a staff member(s) can take initiative to facilitate within his or her own agency and/or area (this will allow for lower cost, provincial distribution, and increased access for staff members).
  - Alternatively, CMHA could train a number of trainers to facilitate this workshop within interested agencies province wide.
  - The workshop should include the use of DVD to show personal accounts of seniors experiencing mental illness, living both in the community and in institutional care. Also, experts within the mental health field would be a valuable addition to the DVD.
  - The Workshop should be informative, yet concise, taking into consideration timing/staffing constraints of health care workers.
  - The Workshop should be able to be presented either as a whole, or in sections, specific to the needs of the agency.
- Development of a promotional or informative tool (i.e. poster, pamphlet) which outlines the differences between cognitive illness, such dementia's and delirium's, and mental illnesses.
  - The expansion of developed educational resource beyond urban centers, into rural areas of the province.
  - The developed educational resource should be promoted and offered to all health care professionals, and not limited to those within the mental health field.

***“Mental illness is not a normal part of aging. All seniors have the right and deserve to receive services and care that promotes their mental health and responds to their mental illness needs.”***

~ Canadian Coalition for Seniors’ Mental Health

## Appendix A



CANADIAN MENTAL  
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February 12, 2007

To whom it may concern:

We are Fifth Year Social Work students at Memorial University, currently completing our final field placement, under the direction of Geoff Chaulk, Executive Director of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Newfoundland and Labrador Division.

We are conducting a research study titled: *“Seniors Mental Health: A Health Workers Perspective.”*

The purpose of this study is to explore, with health care professionals, levels of knowledge and awareness regarding senior’s mental health issues. Our intention is to identify whether or not health care professionals feel it would be helpful/beneficial to have access to additional information/education in this area. Our objective is to bring forth recommendations to CMHA

concerning professional development for health care workers, as a means to maximize services provided to the aging population.

We are asking for your participation in this study, as a benefit to both health care staff and consumers. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form to take part in a face-to-face interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary; therefore, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. The results of the research study may be shared with other organizations outside of CMHA, however, confidentiality will be upheld and your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please email/call any of the following:

Researchers:

**Kim Mercer:** [Kim\\_mercer18@hotmail.com](mailto:Kim_mercer18@hotmail.com) or **Lisa Howell:** [ljhowell84@hotmail.com](mailto:ljhowell84@hotmail.com)

If needed call 945-5218 (Please leave a message, your call will be returned ASAP).

Sincerely, Kim Mercer & Lisa Howell

cc. Geoff Chaulk, Executive Director

Canadian Mental Health Association

[gchaulk@cmhanl.ca](mailto:gchaulk@cmhanl.ca) Phone: 753-8550

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### **Appendix B: Original Interview Tool**



### **Seniors' Mental Health: A Health Care Workers Perspective**

Date:

Time:

Agency:

Occupation:

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1. (a) How long have you been in your Profession?

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(b) How long have you been working with seniors'?

- 
- 
- 
2. Describe your level of knowledge pertaining to seniors' mental health (including postsecondary education, training, work experience, etc)?

- 
- 
- 
3. (a) Have you had any experience working with seniors with mental health issues/illnesses (such as Depression, Anxiety, Schizophrenia, etc)?

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(b) If yes, please describe.

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- 
- 
4. (a) Describe your level of comfort in working with seniors experiencing mental health issues?

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- 
- 
5. (a) Do you feel that you have adequate access to resources (i.e. literature, seminars, in-services, workshops, presentations, educational media, etc.) regarding seniors' mental health/illness?

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(b) What have these resources been, and through what medium have they been offered?

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6. (a) Do you feel that you would benefit from increased access to mental health resources?

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(b) If yes, in what ways would this benefit your work with seniors?

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7. (a) Through your professional experience, what types of resources would best suit the needs of yourself and your colleagues?

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(b) If such resources were made available to you, do you feel you would access them?

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**Thank You for Your Time and Participation!**  
**Appendix C: Revised Interview Tool**



**Seniors' Mental Health: A Health Care Workers Perspective**

Date:

Time:

Agency:

Occupation:

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1. (a) How long have you been in your Profession?

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(b) How long have you been working with seniors'?

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2. Through what means, if any, have you gained knowledge of seniors' mental health

- Post Secondary Education       Work Experience       Work related Training  
 Workshop(s)       In-service(s)       Literature  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. (a) Have you had any experience working with seniors with mental health issues/illnesses (such as Depression, Anxiety, Schizophrenia, etc)?

- Yes       No       Unsure

(b) If yes, please describe.

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4. (a) Describe your level of comfort in working with seniors experiencing mental health issues?

- Not Comfortable       Comfortable       Fairly Comfortable       Very Comfortable

5. (a) Do you feel that you have adequate access to resources (i.e. literature, seminars, in-services, workshops, presentations, educational media, etc.) regarding seniors' mental health/illness?

- Literature       In-services       Workshops       Educational Media  
 Presentations       Internet       Conference       Agency Consultant

Other \_\_\_\_\_

(b) Through what medium have these educational resources been offered?

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6. (a) Do you feel that you would benefit from increased access to mental health resources?

- Yes       No       Unsure

(b) If yes, in what ways would this benefit your work with seniors?

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7. (a) Through your professional experience, what types of resources would best suit the needs of yourself and your colleagues?

Literature       In-services       Workshops       Educational Media

Presentations       Internet       Conference       Agency Consultant

Other \_\_\_\_\_

(b) If such resources were made available to you, do you feel you would access them?

Yes       No       Unsure

**Thank You for Your Time and Participation!**