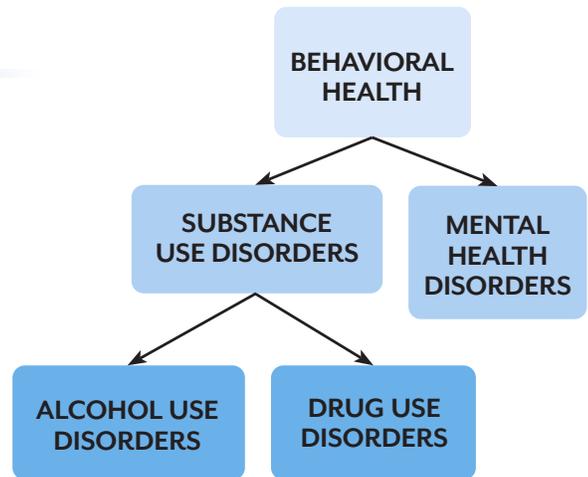


Understanding Behavioral Health Needs in Older Adults: Facts and Service Gaps

DEFINITIONS

Behavioral Health is the term that encompasses both mental health disorders and substance use disorders. Substance use disorders include alcohol use disorders and drug use disorders, or both.



“Substance use and mental health are major public health concerns among older adults, despite tremendous emotional resiliency in this population... heightened sensitivity to substances, which can result in injury, complicate existing medical conditions, or adversely interact with medications.”

“Social isolation, bereavement, or health problems associated with aging can contribute to the development of mental disorders.”

THE NUMBERS

Older adults with Behavioral Health conditions often experience worse health and functional outcomes, have higher rates of emergency department visits, use more medications, have higher healthcare costs than those without a Behavioral Health condition.

- **Approximately 9% of older adults** had a substance use disorder in the past year, almost 6% with an alcohol use disorder and 4% with a drug use disorder.
- **More than 12% of older adults** used illicit drugs in the past year, including almost 10% who used marijuana and over 2% who misused opioids.
- Depressive and anxiety disorders are the most common mental health conditions among older adults, with about **3.5% experiencing a major depressive episode** in the past year. Older adult females were nearly twice as likely as males to have had an major depressive episode.
- In California older adults are the **highest risk age group** for suicide.

The California Commission on Aging serves as the principal advocacy body for older Californians.

ccoa@cco.ca.gov | 916.419.7591 | www.ccoa.ca.gov



Understanding Behavioral Health Needs in Older Adults: Facts and Service Gaps

OLDER ADULTS DON'T GET SERVICES THEY NEED

Behavioral healthcare includes prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, and there are many very effective programs and interventions. However, **only 6% of all public Behavioral Health services are delivered to older adults**, with services provided through Medicare or those dually eligible for Medi-Cal.

Vulnerable older adults, such as those living at or below the federal poverty line, ethnic and racial subgroups, special populations (e.g. LGBTQ+), and those living in rural areas have the most difficulty in getting the help they need.

- Roughly 1 in 9 older adults were classified as needing substance use treatment in the past year, yet **fewer than 1 in 3 of** those received it.
- An estimated **12.5% of older adults** had any mental illness in the past year, including 2% with serious mental illness. **About half of females with any mental illness** received treatment, compared to one-third of males.

“Stigma surrounding mental illness and substance use can create a barrier for older adults to seek treatment, and they may also have difficulty accessing behavioral health services because of cost, transportation, and challenges navigating the healthcare system. Consequently, older adults who might benefit from such treatment often do not receive appropriate diagnosis and care.”

All quotes from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2024/25.

NOTES

Kazandjian, M., Sheikh, F., Watkins, T., “Behavioral Health Services and Older Adults: Coordinating Care Across Systems and the Lifespan,” 2024, *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*. Publication No. PEP24-01-030 2025.

“California’s Behavioral Health Older Adults Survey Report,” 2025, <https://aging.ca.gov/download.ashx?IE0rcNUV0zYheTXkDXbPAw%3d%3d> (accessed March 11, 2026).

“2022 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health,” <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-survey-drug-use-and-health/national-releases/2022> (accessed March 11, 2026).

Toth, M., Gibbons, B., Levinson, A., Kar, N., Keyes, V., Nye, E., Jacobus Kantor, L., and Creedon, T., “Behavioral Health Diagnosis, Service Utilization, and Spending Among Older Adult Medicare Beneficiaries: A Chartbook,” 2025, *The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation*.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Boockvar, K., “Impact of depression and mental illness on outcomes of medical illness in older adults,” 2014, [https://www.clinicaltherapeutics.com/article/S0149-2918\(14\)00683-3/fulltext](https://www.clinicaltherapeutics.com/article/S0149-2918(14)00683-3/fulltext) (accessed March 11, 2026).

“The state of mental health and aging in America,” 2008, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/43388/cdc_43388_DS1.pdf1 (accessed March 11, 2026).

AgeWatch

