



Karol Swartzlander, Executive Director  
Gavin Newsom, Governor

# 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.

## 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.

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*“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.”*

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## Behavioral Health Includes

Behavioral Health > Substance Use Disorders & Mental Health Disorders

Substance Use Disorders > Alcohol Use Disorders & Drug Use Disorders

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



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## 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.

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*“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.)*

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## NOTES

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