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Older Americans' Attitudes Toward and Experiences with Mental Health Issues

Findings from a National Survey

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A new survey among Americans 65 and older explores attitudes toward and experiences with mental health issues. The survey included an oversample of older adults who have had a mental health diagnosis or have had recent feelings of depression or anxiety. Results suggest that many older adults may not be receiving evidence-based standards of care, such as being informed about the side effects of treatment and receiving timely follow-up care. Despite receiving care for depression or anxiety, many older adults are still struggling with feelings of depression or anxiety. The John A. Hartford Foundation commissioned Lake Research Partners to conduct a survey among n=1,318 adults 65 and older nationwide from November 16 through 26, 2012. The margin of error is ± 3.9 percentage points. More details about the methodology are at the end of this memo.

Among the key findings are:

- One in five older adults (21%) has heard that depression can double the risk of having dementia. Seventy-eight percent had not heard about this risk or are unsure. One in three has heard that depression doubles the risk of heart disease (34%) or increases the risk of dying from another disease (35%).
- One in five respondents (20%) reports having been diagnosed with a mental health issue. Fourteen percent have been diagnosed with depression and 11% have been told by a doctor they have anxiety.
- Many respondents articulate what depression or anxiety feels like in response to an open-ended question:

"Depression is the worst feeling I have ever felt. It was as if I were falling into a deep dark well and I could not climb out of it. I had no energy. I was lethargic and moody. My family suffered too because there was nothing they could do to help."

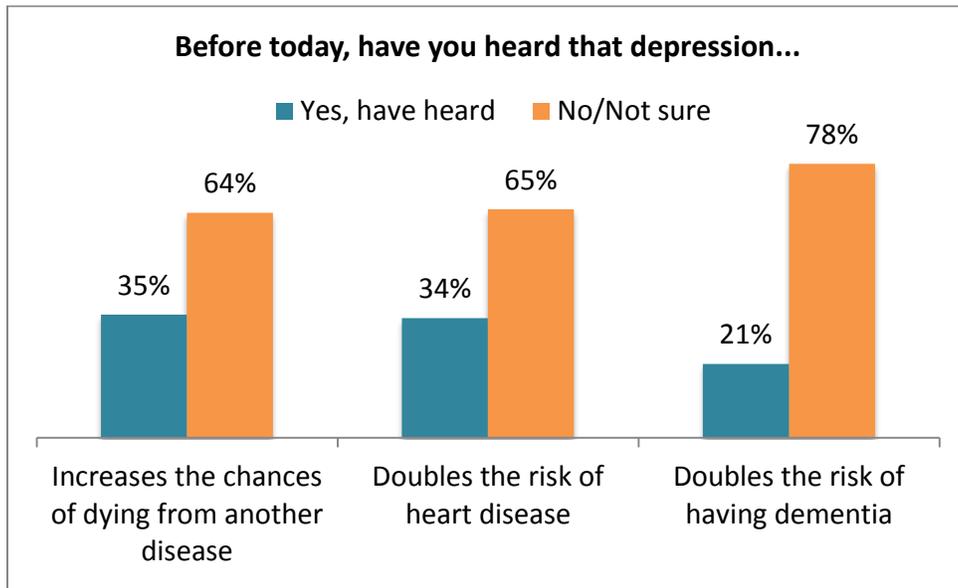
"Dark, gray, lonely, slow."

- About one in six older adults (16%) has received treatment for a depression, anxiety, or another mental health issue since turning 65.
- Among those who talked to their doctor about getting treatment since age 65, many report conversations that lacked components of evidenced-based standards of care. For example, 38% of those currently receiving treatment say their doctor or health care provider did not tell them about possible side effects of treatment. Close to half (46%) say their doctor did not follow up with them after a couple weeks to see how they were doing with the treatment.
- More than half of older adults currently receiving treatment for a mental health issue are still struggling with frequent feelings of anxiety (63%) or depression (55%).
- A majority of adults 65 and older (62%) say they think their doctor should have someone on staff who can help patients with issues like depression and anxiety. African Americans (78%) and those currently being treated for a mental health issue but still struggling with feelings of depression or anxiety (82%) are most likely to want a trained professional in their doctor's office.
- Only 13% of older adults say they would not tell anyone if they were feeling depressed or anxious. A majority (77%) says they would tell their primary care provider if they were feeling depressed or anxious – even if they had to raise the issue on their own, without being asked. Only one in four (25%) says their doctor has asked about their mood in the past 12 months.

Detailed Findings

Attitudes toward Mental Health Issues

Most adults 65 and older lack awareness about the health impact of depression. About one third of adults 65 and older say they have heard that depression increases the chances of dying from another disease (35%) or that depression doubles the risk of heart disease (34%). About two-thirds say they have not heard this information or are unsure. Fewer (21%) have heard that depression doubles the risk of having dementia.

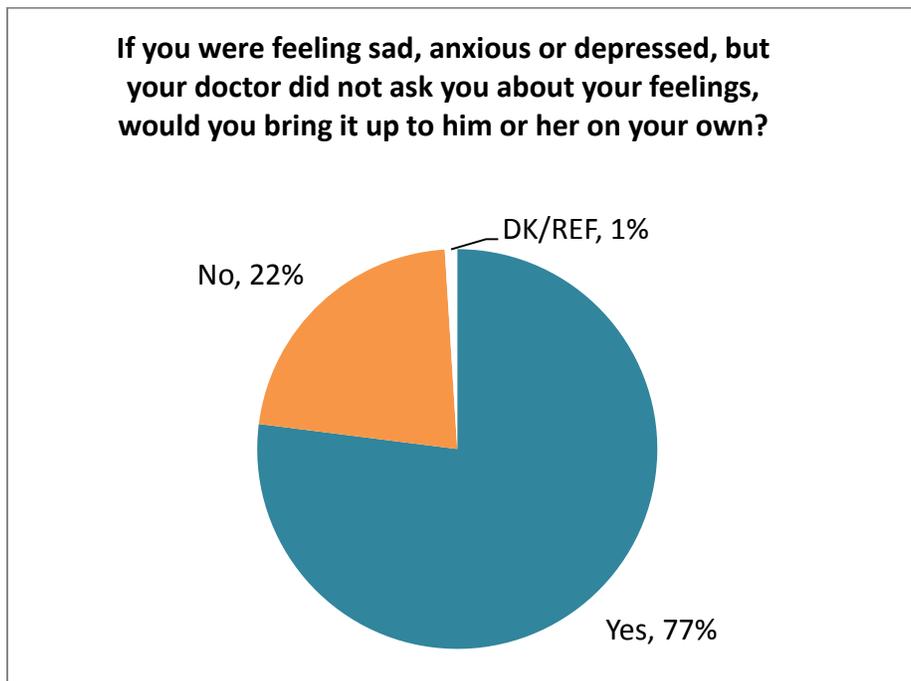


In addition to a lack of awareness, some older adults may have misinformation about depression. One in four older adults (27%) agrees that “depression is a natural part of aging and growing old.”

Most older adults seem comfortable talking about depression and anxiety. Only 13% of older adults say they would not tell anyone if they were feeling depressed or anxious. Half (50%) say they would talk to someone, and 36% say they are not sure.

The main reason to hold back from talking to others is the view that the “feelings will pass” (57%). Just 16% say the main reason to withhold feelings is: “I am embarrassed to talk about it.”

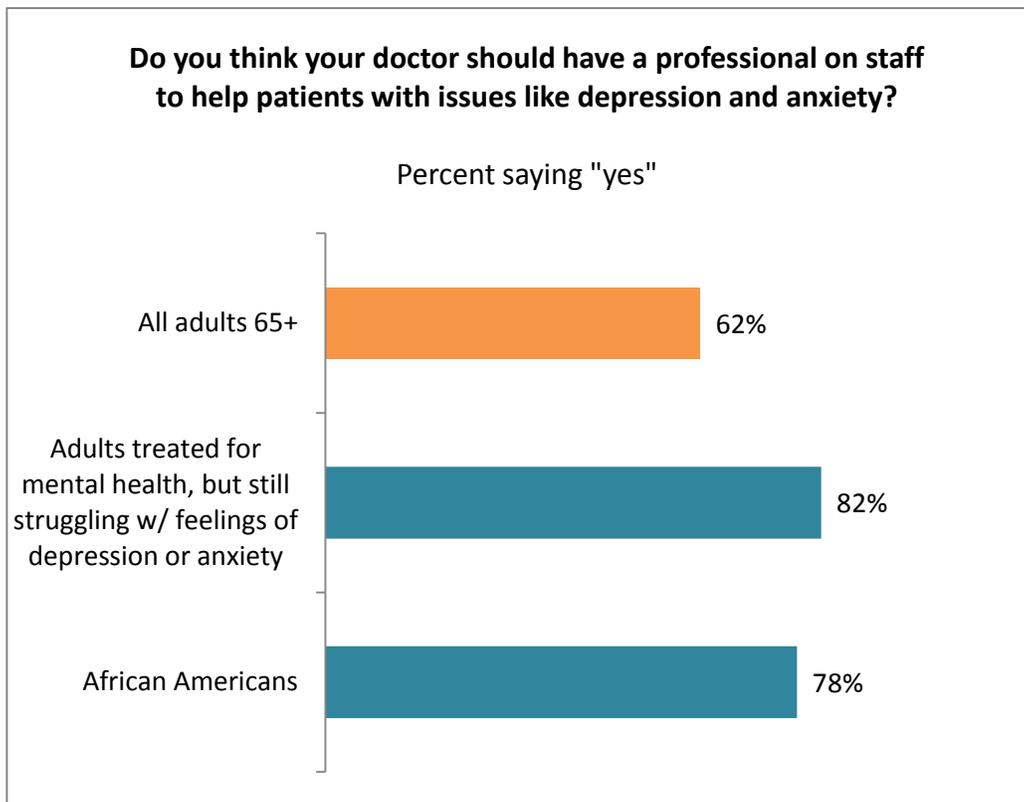
A majority of adults 65 and older (77%) say they would talk to their primary care doctor or health care provider if they were feeling sad, anxious, or depressed – even if their doctor did not ask them about their feelings.



Most older adults (74%) say their primary care doctor or health care provider has not asked about their mood in the past 12 months. One in four (25%) says their provider has asked whether they were feeling sad, anxious, or depressed.

Older adults like the idea of having a trained mental health professional on staff at their primary care physician’s office. Respondents were presented with the following information: “Some primary care doctors have a person on staff in the doctor’s office who is trained to help people care for issues like depression and anxiety. This person is sometimes a nurse, social worker, psychologist, or other trained professional.”

After this description, 62% of adults 65 and older say they think their doctor should have someone on staff who can help patients with these issues. African Americans (78%) and those currently being treated for a mental health issue but still struggling with feelings of anxiety or depression (82%) are most likely to want a trained professional in their doctor’s office.

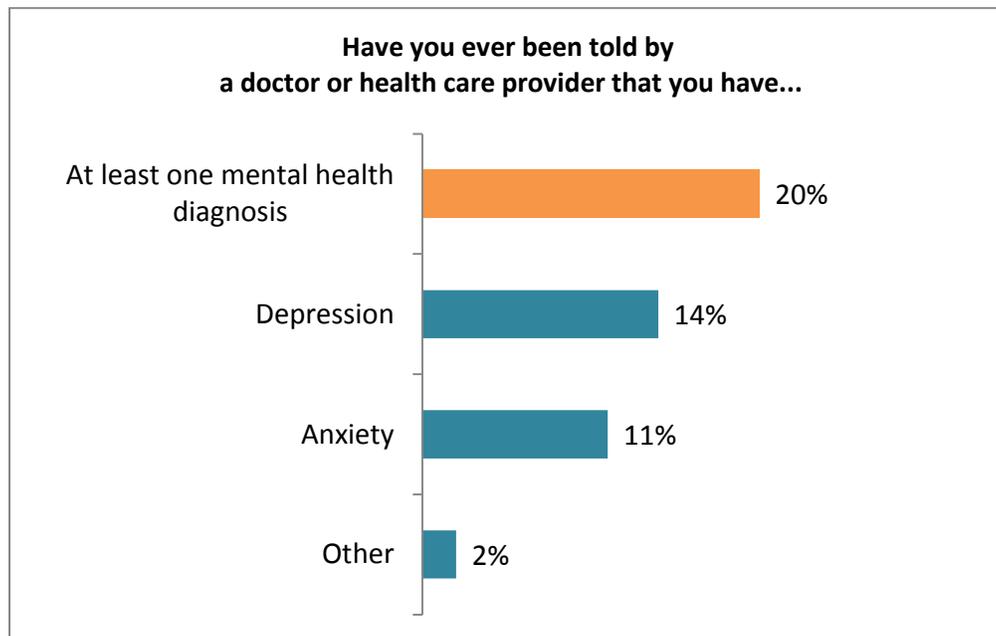


If feeling depressed or anxious, 61% of respondents say they would want help from someone in their doctor’s office. About one-third (36%) would prefer to go for help outside their doctor’s office.

A large majority of older adults would want a say in the type of treatment they might get for depression or anxiety. About eight in ten adults 65 and older (79%) say it would be very important for them to have a say in the types of mental health care they might get, if they were feeling depressed or anxious. Sixteen percent feel it would be somewhat important to have a say. Only four percent feel it would not be important to be involved in the types of care or treatment they might receive.

Experiences with Mental Health Issues and Treatment

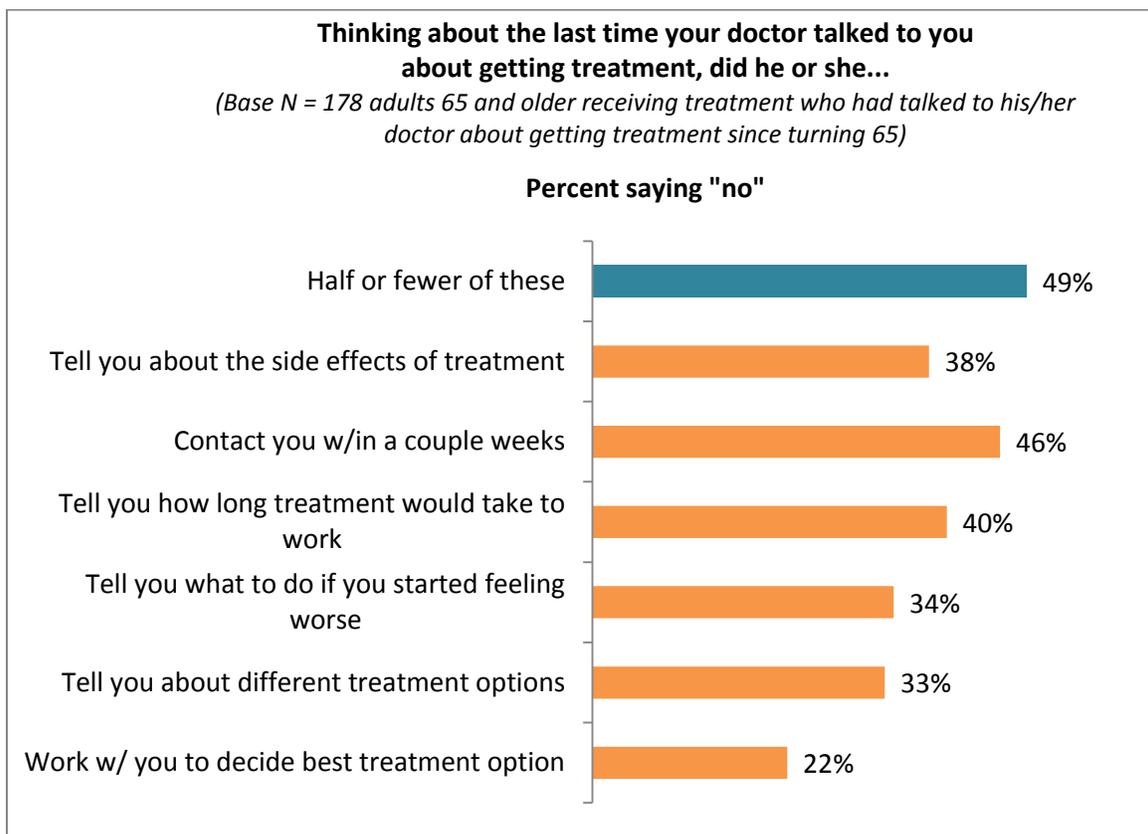
One in five respondents says they have been diagnosed at some point with depression, anxiety, or another mental health issue. Fourteen percent of survey respondents say they have been told by a doctor they have depression. One in ten (11%) says they have been diagnosed with anxiety, and two percent report another mental health issue. A total of 20% say they have been diagnosed with at least one mental health issue.



Of those who have had a diagnosis, 64% say they were diagnosed before turning age 65; 34% say the diagnosis came after turning 65. That means a total of 7% of all respondents have been diagnosed with a mental health issue since turning age 65. Thirteen percent have had a diagnosis prior to age 65.

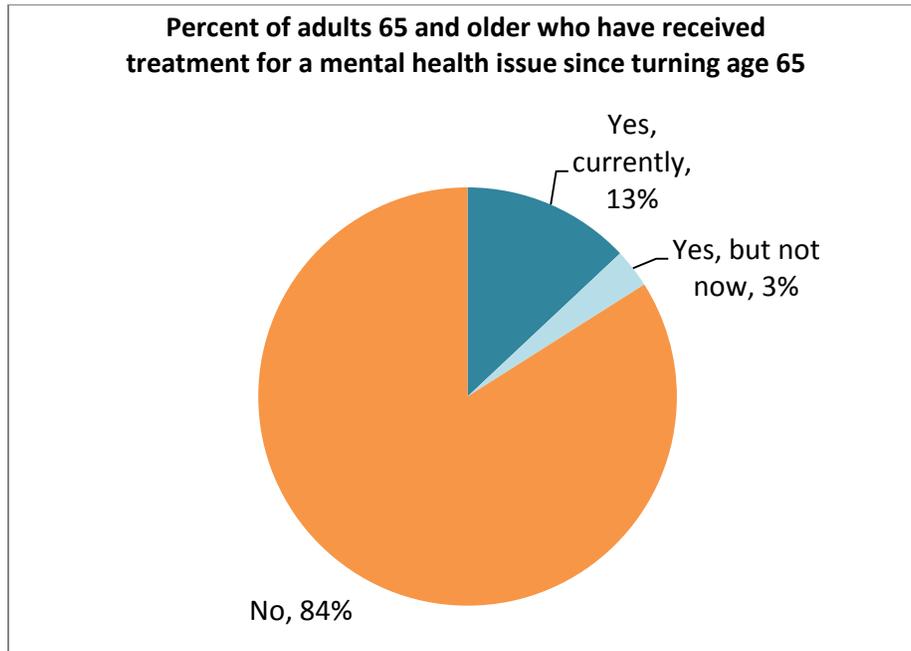
Most respondents who have discussed treatment with their doctor report incomplete conversations. A majority of respondents who have been diagnosed since turning 65 (69%) have talked to a doctor about getting treatment for their mental health issue.

Many conversations, however, lack information about key aspects of treatment. About four in ten currently receiving treatment say their doctor or health care provider did not talk to them about possible side effects of treatment (38%) or how long it would take for treatments to work (40%). About one-third (33%) say their provider did not tell them about different treatment options, or tell them what to do if they started feeling worse (34%). Nearly half (46%) say their doctor did not follow up within a couple weeks to see how they were doing with the treatment.



Half of adults 65 and older who are currently getting treatment (49%) say their doctor did only three or fewer of these things when discussing treatment. Women are more likely than men to report their health care providers taking just three or fewer of these actions (66% vs. 51%).

One in seven respondents has received treatment since turning age 65. Sixteen percent of respondents say they have received treatment for depression, anxiety, or another mental health issue since turning 65. Thirteen percent are currently receiving treatment. Among those who have received a mental health diagnosis since turning age 65, 81% have received some type of treatment.

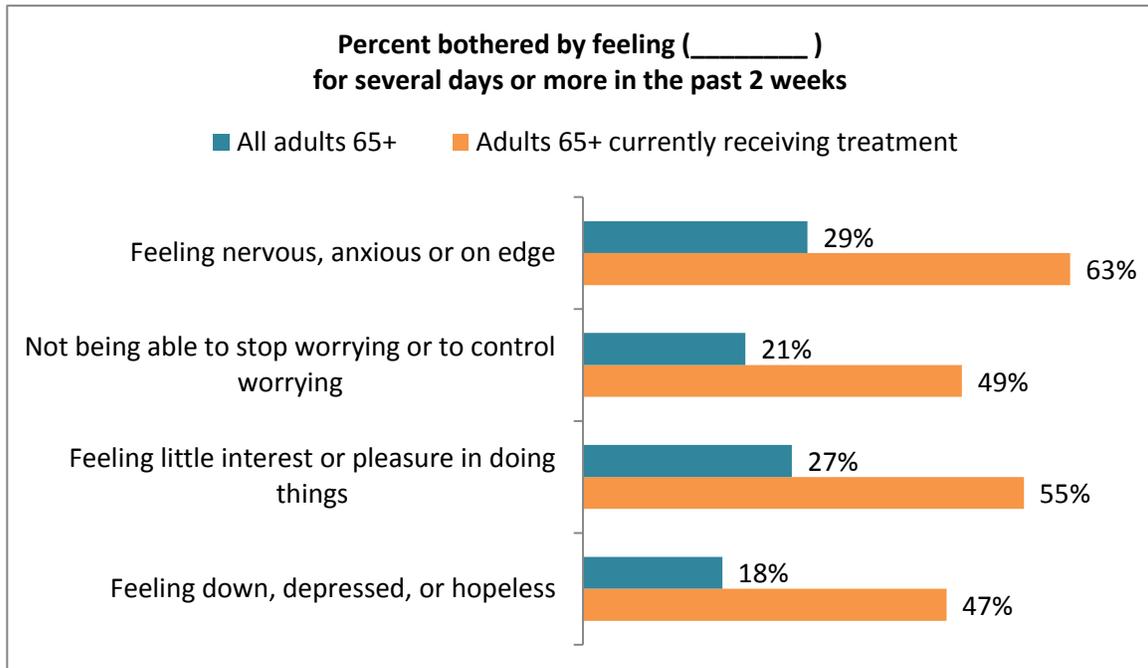


The most common type of treatment reported is prescription medications. More than nine in ten (93%) of older adults currently receiving treatment for a mental health issue say they are taking a prescription medication. About one in five (19%) says they are receiving counseling or therapy. Seven percent of those who say they are receiving treatment report taking over-the-counter medication to help with their mental health issue.

Despite treatment, many still struggle with feelings related to depression and anxiety.

Overall, 29% of adults 65 and older have been bothered by feeling “nervous, anxious, or on edge” at least several days in the past two weeks. One in five (21%) feels the same about being unable to stop or control their worrying. Similar proportions say they have been bothered by feeling little interest or pleasure in doing things (27%) in the past two weeks or by feeling “down, depressed, or hopeless” (18%).

About half or more adults who are currently receiving treatment for depression, anxiety or another mental health issue are still experiencing frequent feelings of anxiety or depression.



What does depression or anxiety feel like? Respondents who report a diagnosis or feelings of depression or anxiety were asked in an open-ended question what it feels like to be depressed or anxious. Following are verbatim responses.

How does it feel to be depressed or anxious?

“You can't make decisions on your own. You want to stay in bed all the time, you don't care about anything.”

“Tired, anxious, in pain about the shoulders, lower back and neck. Short of breath. Isolated. And many other unexplainable pains.”

“Some days it is beyond bearable and I stay in bed. Usually it is manageable, and I am able to keep others from noticing. I am on meds, and it helps, but I still have to deal with the feelings on most days, to some degree.”

“Scary. When you never thought you would end up the way you have. And there isn't enough time or whatever to change it. You can't ‘dust it off’ after 65.”

“Like you would prefer to be dead. You can't do anything or go any place, so why try.”

“Like a rapidly vibrating piece of tin stuck in a concrete slab.”

“I take [a medication] for my depressive feelings. Without it, I lash out at people and feel exhausted, sad, and listless. Since I started [my medication], I have not had these feelings.”

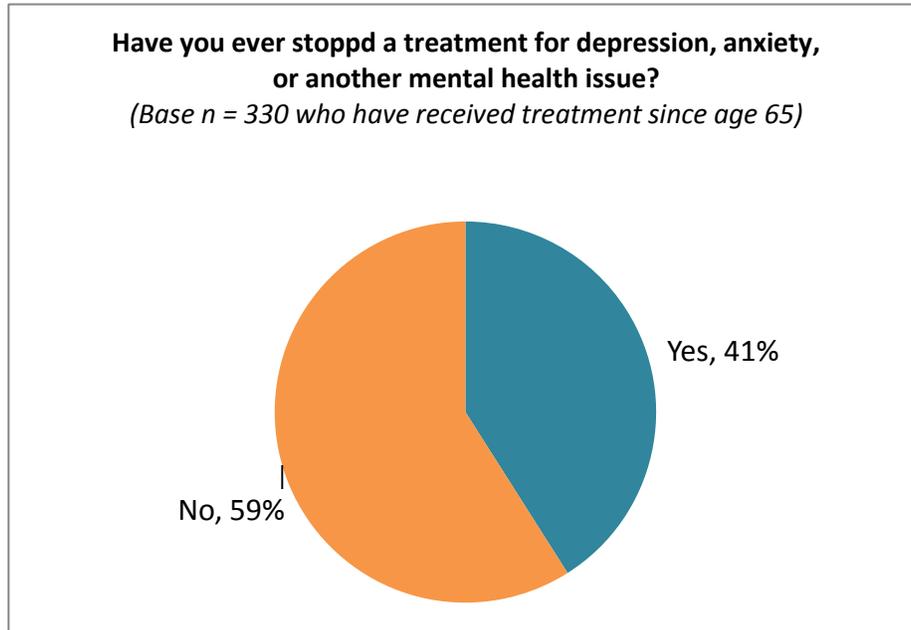
“Depression is the worst feeling I have ever felt. It was as if I were falling into a deep dark well and I could not climb out of it. I had no energy. I was lethargic and moody. My family suffered too because there was nothing they could do to help.”

“Dark, gray, lonely, slow.”

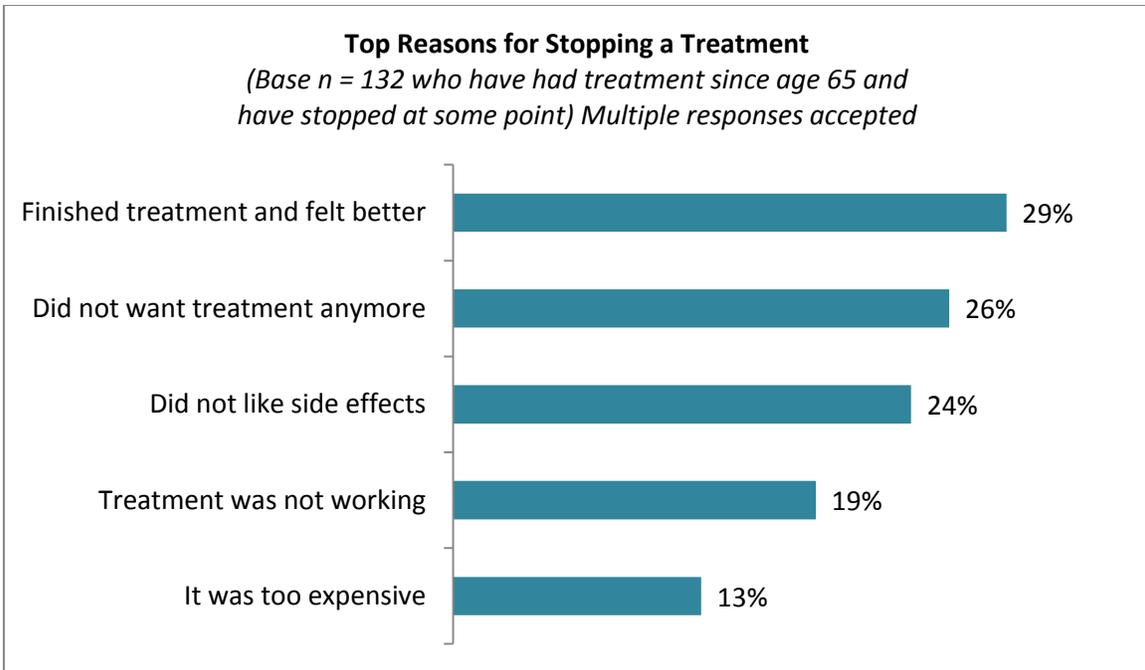
“Like no one cares.”

“Like being in a glass cage.”

Many have stopped treatment at some point in the past. Of respondents who have received treatment since age 65, 41% say there has been a time when they stopped their treatment.

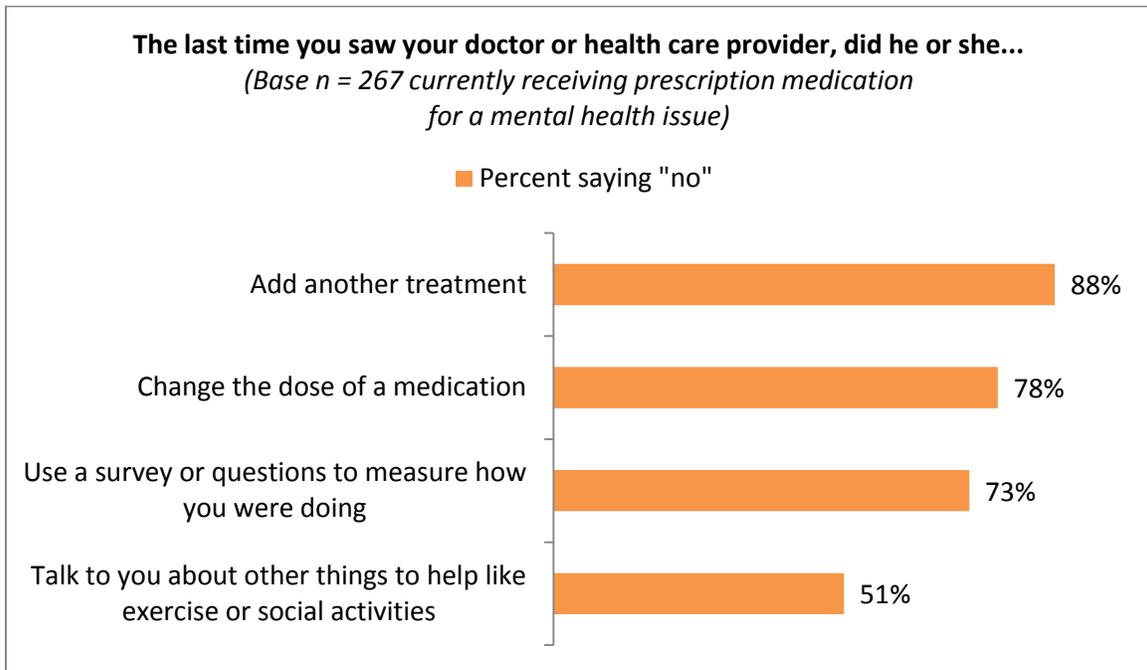


Most did not stop treatment because they were done and felt better (29%). About one in four (24%) says they stopped because they did not like the side effects. Nineteen percent stopped because the treatment was not working. Thirteen percent report stopping because treatment was too expensive. About one in four (26%) says they did not want treatment anymore.



Among those who stopped treatment, 61% say their doctor or health care provider did not talk to them about how to prevent the depression, anxiety, or other mental health issue from coming back.

Providers may be lacking in follow-up care for mental health treatment. Respondents who have received mental health treatment since age 65 were asked about the last time they saw their doctor or health care provider. Of those currently receiving a prescription medication for a mental health issue, majorities say their doctor or health care provider did not use a survey or questions to measure how they were doing (73%). Half (51%) say their doctor did not talk to them about things they could do for themselves to help feel better, like exercise or social activities. Most did not report a change in dose (78%) or the addition of another treatment (88%) the last time they saw their doctor or health care provider.



Some wish their doctor would do more to ensure effective treatment. Almost one in four respondents (23%) who have received treatment since age 65 says they wish their doctor would do more to make sure their treatment is working. Almost four in ten (39%) of those currently receiving treatment but still struggling with feelings of depression or anxiety wish their doctor would do more.

Detailed Methodology

Lake Research Partners conducted this survey among a total of n=1,318 adults 65 and older nationwide from November 16 through 26, using Knowledge Networks (KN). A base survey of n=1,011 was conducted among a nationally-representative sample of adults 65 and older. An additional n=307 interviews were conducted among adults 65 and older who have had a mental health diagnosis or have experienced recent feelings of depression or anxiety. The purpose of the oversample was to boost the number of adults who have experienced mental health treatment since age 65. The oversample was weighted down to its proper proportion for reporting purposes. The margin of error is ± 3.9 percentage points.

KN has the only probability-based online panel of Americans in the country. If a household recruited for the panel does not have internet access or a computer, KN provides both. Data from KN's panel has been published in numerous peer-reviewed academic journals, such as the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), by major national news organizations, such as the Associated Press, and used by academic and government research institutions across the country. For more information, see: <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/>