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## MENTAL HEALTH IN OLD AGE: CHALLENGES, NURSING MANAGEMENT, AND POSSIBILITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE ALBANIAN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

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### Abstract

Mental health issues among older adults are becoming a growing concern across the world, and Albania is no exception. With an aging population, the challenges in Albania are deepened by social isolation, limited healthcare infrastructure, and a lack of specialized services.

This narrative review explores the most common mental health conditions affecting the elderly—such as depression, dementia, and anxiety—and reflects on their causes, consequences, and how they are currently being managed. It also highlights the important role that nurses play in early identification, care planning and family engagement, while pointing out gaps in professional training and systemic support.

Drawing on global examples and regional data, the paper offers clear and realistic recommendations for improving mental health care for older adults in Albania—through better policies, stronger professional training, and more integrated, community-based services.

**Keywords:** *mental health, older adults, nursing, dementia, depression, integrated care, Albania*

### Introduction

As populations age around the world, more attention is being paid to the mental health of older adults. In Albania, this issue is becoming increasingly urgent. Conditions like depression, dementia, and anxiety are common, yet they often go undiagnosed. Many older adults struggle in silence due to a mix of stigmas, lack of access to services, and a healthcare system that's still catching up with their needs.

Mental health in older age is a complex, urgent, and often neglected issue in Albania. Without early detection and better systems of support, conditions like depression and dementia will only continue to grow.

In this review, we explore the mental health landscape for elderly people in Albania. We look at the most widespread mental health problems they face, the root causes behind them, and the role nurses play in addressing these challenges. The paper also outlines practical strategies to improve care—focusing on early intervention, community-based support, and the need for better training and policies.

However, there is real potential for improvement. Nurses can lead the way—if we invest in their training and support. Community-based care, better coordination between services, and a more compassionate approach can help create a healthier, more dignified future for Albania's aging population.

## Methodology

This is a narrative review based on articles from reputable databases like PubMed, ScienceDirect, and WHO publications, focusing on the years 2015 to 2024. We selected studies that discuss mental health in older adults, with particular attention to nursing interventions and preventive strategies. A thematic analysis was used to organize and interpret the material.

### *Purpose of the Study*

This study aims to understand the main mental health challenges faced by the elderly in Albania. It pays special attention to the role of nurses—not just in identifying and managing these conditions, but also in working within the broader health system.

### *Objectives*

- To identify the most frequent mental health conditions affecting older people, in Albania and globally.
- To examine the factors that contribute to or worsen these conditions.
- To understand how nurses currently respond to these issues in both general and specialized care.

### **Most common mental health disorders in older adults**

Mental health in later life is shaped by a mix of biological changes, psychological stressors, and social dynamics.

*Depression* is one of the most common conditions but is often hidden. It doesn't always show up as sadness might appear as fatigue, poor sleep, or lack of interest in activities. It's frequently linked to chronic illness, bereavement, or social isolation.

*Dementia*, including Alzheimer's disease, seriously impacts memory and decision-making, often limiting a person's ability to live independently. In Albania, studies suggest that around 14% of people over age 50 already show signs of cognitive decline.

*Anxiety* can also be common in older adults, particularly when they experience health problems, financial stress, or the fear of losing their independence.

*Other conditions* such as psychosis, substance abuse, or personality changes are less frequent but can have a devastating effect on a person's ability to function and connect with others.

### **Epidemiological Overview**

Globally, mental health issues are a major source of disability, causing significant economic losses and shorter lives for individuals. In Albania, local data is limited but indicates a high presence of severe disorders like schizophrenia, greatly affecting work health and hospitalizations. This overview can serve as a basis for further studies, investments in psychosocial support and rehabilitation, Intervention projects in employment and socialization for individuals with mental disorders.

#### *Epidemiological overview – older adults with mental health problems*

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Global – Older Adults 60+/65+</i>	<i>Albania – Older Adults 50+/65+</i>
Prevalence of mental disorders including neurological	20% of adults $\geq 60$ years have a mental or neurological disorder. Prevalence of dementia: approximately 7% at age $\geq 65$ years; 20–40% at $\geq 85$ years.	Among those aged 50+, the prevalence of cognitive disorders was 14.0%, of which 2.3% had serious impairment.

Prevalence of depression/anxiety	About 4.4% of the general population; in the elderly, almost the same, usually more for females.	In Elbasan, among $\geq 65$ years: depression 87.8% and anxiety 88% during COVID-19; mainly mild.
DALYs – disability related to mental health	6.6% of DALY over 60 years are caused by mental/neurological disorders. Globally, DALYs for mental disorders are 1,566 per 100,000 in 2019.	No local data for DALYs, but the prevalence of dementia (14%) suggests a significant burden.
Mortality – reduced lifespan	Individuals with severe mental disorders lose 10–20 years of life in developed countries, 30 years in developing countries. Dementia is responsible for 1.8 million deaths in 2021.	No official statistics in Albania for mortality specific to older adults with mental health problems.
Functional disability/job performance	In the working age, disability due to depression is significant; among 60+, they are not employed but experience loss of self-care ability. It is part of 6.6% of DALY.	No direct evaluations for the ability of older adults to work. Studies indicate a link between depression/anxiety and poverty, isolation, and low self-esteem.

### Mental Health Problems in Older Adults – Prevalence and specific issues

#### a. Prevalence and Impact of Mental Health Issues

- According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), approximately 15% of older adults over 60 experience mental health disorders, where depression and dementia are among the most prevalent, significantly contributing to the global disease burden.
- A study by Prince et al. (2015) in *The Lancet* emphasizes that dementia affects more than 46 million people worldwide and is expected to rise to 131 million by 2050, underscoring the urgent need for interventions and specialized policies.

#### b. Specific Issues and Needs of Older Adults

- Fiske, Wetherell, and Gatz (2009) in the *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* highlight that depression in older adults has significant impacts on physical functioning and quality of life and is often underdiagnosed and undertreated.
- Regional studies in the Balkans, including Albania, show that mental health issues in older adults are closely related to social factors such as loneliness, isolation, and lack of family support (Hoxha et al., 2021).

#### c. Lack of Data and Need for Local Studies

- An article published by Khalil et al. (2018) in *BMC Geriatrics* emphasizes the importance of epidemiological studies in various national contexts to tailor mental health interventions for older adults.
- In Albania, some reports from the Institute of Public Health (2019) stress the lack of reliable statistics and in-depth studies on mental disorders in the elderly, creating a gap in public policy planning.

#### d. Benefits of Early Interventions and Service Modeling

- Chatterjee et al. (2018) in an analysis in *Cochrane Database* shows that psychological interventions and community programs for older adults with depression and anxiety significantly improve quality of life and reduce hospital admissions.
- Successful models in Balkan countries, such as Albania and Croatia, include the development of community services with nursing and family support, reducing stigma and increasing access to treatment (Marković et al., 2020).

### Why Mental Health Matters in Old Age

The World Health Organization reports that about 15% of adults over 60 suffer from a mental health disorder. Depression and dementia are the most common yet are often poorly understood and under-addressed in healthcare systems.

In Albania and the Balkans more broadly, mental health in older adults is closely linked to issues such as

loneliness, lack of family contact, and a shortage of community support. There’s also a major lack of local data, which makes it hard to design effective programs.

However, when identified early, many of these conditions can be managed. Community programs and psychological support can make a significant difference, as shown by successful models in neighboring countries like Croatia.

### **What Increases the Risk?**

Several factors contribute to poor mental health in older adults:

- *Biological*: age-related changes in the brain, chronic illnesses, and genetic risks.
- *Psychological*: unresolved trauma, grief, or a fragile emotional state.
- *Social*: poverty, isolation, stigma, or lack of supportive relationships.

In Albania, the situation is worsen by overmedication (polypharmacy), a shortage of geriatric professionals, and limited use of screening tools in primary care.

### **The Role of Nurses**

Nurses are often the first contact point for elderly patients and play a central role in managing their mental health. They observe changes in mood or behavior, talk with families, and coordinate care.

But in Albania, nursing education doesn’t yet place enough emphasis on mental health in older adults. Many nurses lack the tools or confidence to address these issues effectively.

Still, when well-trained and supported, nurses can make a major difference. They are in a unique position to spot early signs, educate families, and provide long-term emotional and psychological care.

### **Nursing Diagnosis in Geriatric Mental Health**

Nursing diagnosis is a critical component of the care process for older adults with mental health issues. It provides a structured framework that helps in identifying specific problems, selecting the most effective interventions, enhancing the quality of care and tailoring it according to the real needs of the patient.

Through this process, nurses fulfill their role as clinical caregivers, close observers, and emotional supporters, positively impacting the mental and social well-being of older adults. The nursing diagnosis is formulated using the PES model:

- P: Problem (what is it?)
- E: Etiology (why does it happen? causes)
- S: Signs/symptoms that characterize it

Using the PES model (Problem, Etiology, Symptoms), nurses can create care plans that truly reflect the needs of the individual.

*Examples of Common Nursing Diagnoses in Older Adults:*

Diagnosis	Cause	Symptoms	Care Goal
Depression	Loneliness, illness	Apathy, poor sleep/appetite	Improve mood
Risk of injury	Delirium, infection	Hallucinations, disorientation	Ensure safety
Anxiety	Loss of autonomy	Muscle tension, fear	Reduce anxiety levels
Social isolation	Lack of support	Withdrawal, sadness	Increase social interaction
Grief	Bereavement	Tearfulness, insomnia	Facilitate healthy grieving

Using the PES model (Problem, Etiology, Symptoms), nurses can create care plans that truly reflect the needs of the individual.

Here are a few examples:

- A patient with persistent low mood due to isolation might benefit from structured activities and regular engagement.
- Someone experiencing anxiety because of declining independence might need emotional support and coping strategies.
- Older adults at risk of self-harm may require close monitoring, regular contact with healthcare staff, and involvement from their family.

### **Systemic Challenges in Albania**

Albania faces several obstacles when it comes to caring for older adults with mental health issues:

- There is little epidemiological data, making it hard to plan services.
- Mental health care is limited, especially outside major cities.
- Nursing education lacks strong content on geriatric psychiatry.
- Cultural stigma often prevents people from asking for help.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and worsened many of these gaps. During lockdowns, over 80% of older adults in Albania reported feelings of depression or anxiety—yet few had access to care.

### **Consequences of Untreated Mental Health Problems**

When mental health issues go untreated, the effects ripple out across a person's life:

- Physical health declines, raising the risk of other diseases.
- Psychological symptoms worsen, leading to withdrawal or despair.
- Relationships suffer, and social isolation increases.
- Hospitalizations become more frequent, putting pressure on families and the healthcare system.

### **Addiction and Polypharmacy in Older Adults**

Older adults are more vulnerable to addiction and medication-related problems. Alcohol, prescription sedatives, or even technology-related dependencies can go unnoticed.

Polypharmacy—taking multiple medications at once—can lead to side effects, confusion, and greater risk of falls or hospitalization.

Managing these issues means involving nurses in medication reviews, using non-drug alternatives, and educating both patients and caregivers.

### **Conclusions**

1. The mental health of the elderly is a complex and multidimensional challenge, significantly impacting quality of life, physical health, and social functioning.
2. The primary mental health issues in older adults include depression, dementia (including Alzheimer's disease), and anxiety, which require specialized diagnosis and management.

3. The etiological and exacerbating factors include biological, psychological, and social elements, emphasizing the need for an integrated and multidisciplinary approach.
4. Epidemiology shows a high prevalence and substantial impact of these disorders in the elderly population, highlighting the need for specific approaches at the global and Albanian levels.
5. Integrated management of mental health is more effective and economically sustainable, involving the active role of families, nurses, physicians, and institutions.
6. The role of the nurse is crucial in assessment, nursing diagnosis, monitoring, and psychological and social interventions, both in the community and specialized services.
7. Polypharmacy and addiction issues are significant challenges in managing older adults with mental disorders, requiring careful treatment and staff education.
8. University and continuing education for nurses in mental health is inadequate and needs strengthening to prepare qualified professionals.

### Recommendations

1. Strengthening the capacities of healthcare staff, particularly nurses and family physicians, through specialized training in the diagnosis and management of mental health issues.
2. Reform and harmonization of university curricula and continuing education for nursing, including dedicated modules and clinical practice in the field of mental health.
3. Development of integrated management models involving multidisciplinary collaboration, active family involvement, and the use of modern technologies for monitoring and treatment.
4. Training and support for informal caregivers, providing psychological, educational, and organized respite services to reduce their burden.
5. Development of preventive and promotional programs, including public education, encouraging physical and social activity among the elderly to prevent mental health issues.
6. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of services and programs to ensure adaptation to the needs of the elderly population and continuous improvement of care.

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