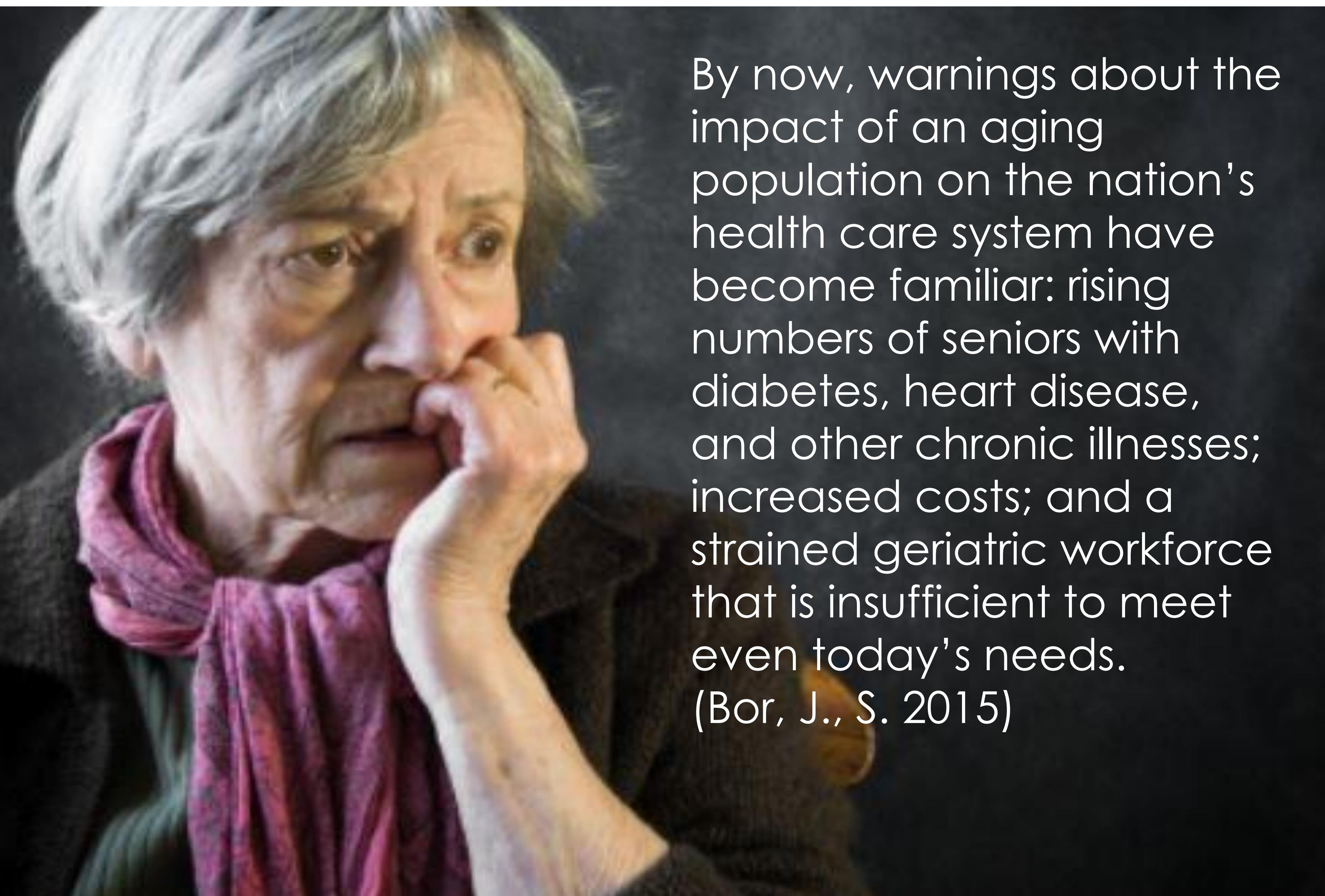




Peer Support for Older Adults

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By now, warnings about the impact of an aging population on the nation's health care system have become familiar: rising numbers of seniors with diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic illnesses; increased costs; and a strained geriatric workforce that is insufficient to meet even today's needs.
(Bor, J., S. 2015)

What we don't talk about enough is the dramatically rising number of older adults with serious mental health challenges

Why?

What are some of the reasons for increases in the numbers of older adults with mental health problems?



Adding to the increased life expectancy and the aging of the Baby Boomer generation as factors that result in larger numbers of older adults experiencing mental health disorders, is:

- In 2015 nearly 57% of adults with psychiatric disorders did not receive treatment
- Baby boomers are afraid that people will view them differently
- They are worried that they will experience discrimination
 - They have been told that mental health problems are a weakness, and not simply a treatable health conditions



The percentage of older adults with mental health problems is, in fact, not rising but for the first time in recorded history the percentage of the world wide population over 65 years old is rising. In 2010 it was 13% and it is projected to rise to 16% by 2020. (Reynolds et al. 2015)



"In my day, people died."

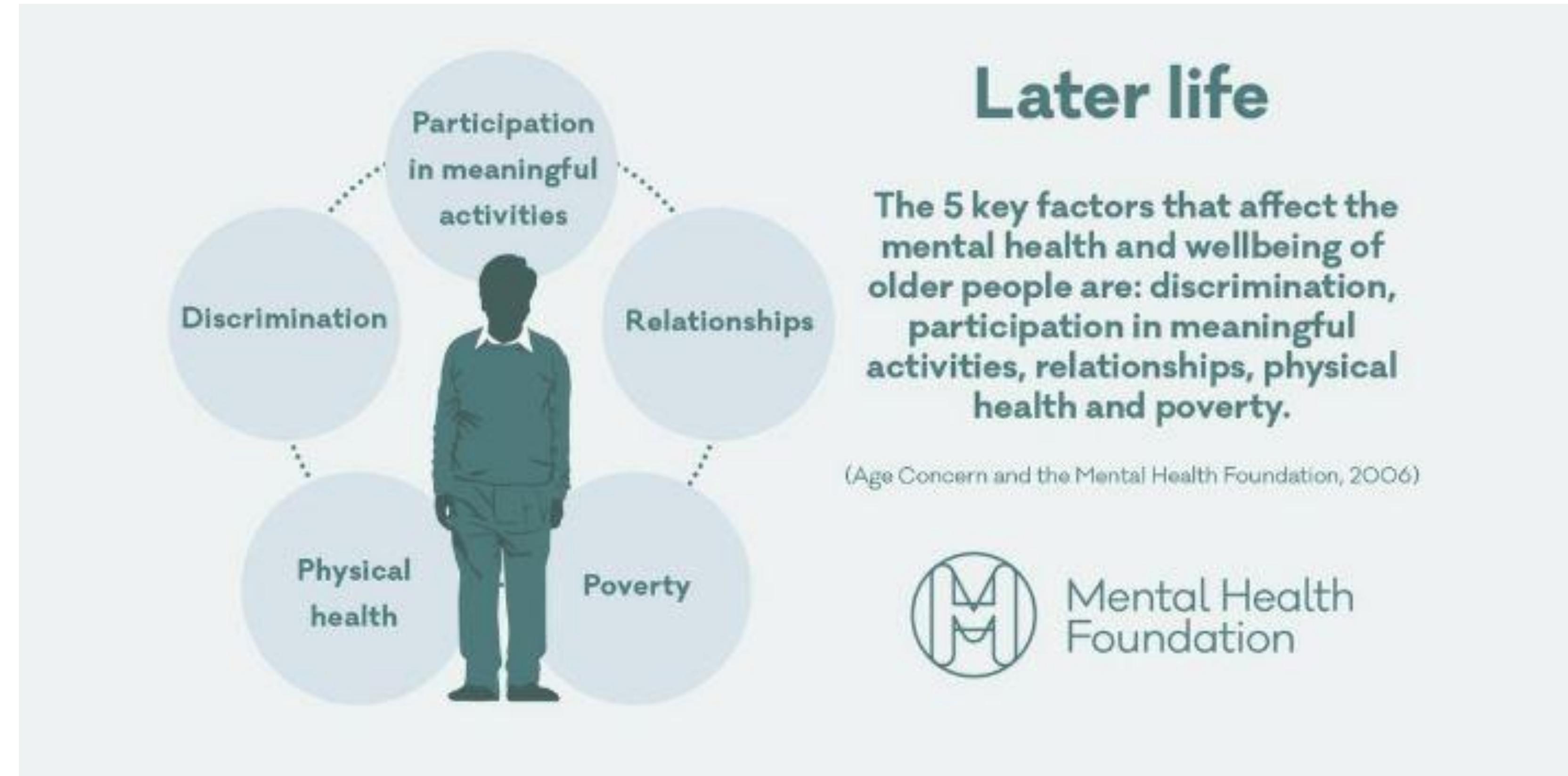
- Between 1970 and 2015, life expectancy has increased from 71 years to 79 years
- People are living longer, including those with mental health disorders
- This results in an overall rise in the number of adults over 65 with mental health diagnoses.



Factors that affect mental health in older adults

There are many reasons for mental health problems for older adults

- Aging for many is a time of losses and loneliness.
- Societal roles change with retirement and a general devaluing of older adults.
- Physical health problems increase.
- People experience losses of loved ones and friends.
- Financial security is lessened sometimes resulting in drastic changes in lifestyle.



- 20% of older adults in the community may be experiencing mental health problems, primarily depression.
- Recent research shows that depression can contribute to the worsening of other chronic health problems which, in turn, creates higher mortality and higher costs in health care.
- Interdisciplinary geriatric teams, made up of mental health, primary care, and rehabilitation specialists are effective in maintaining health and wellness.

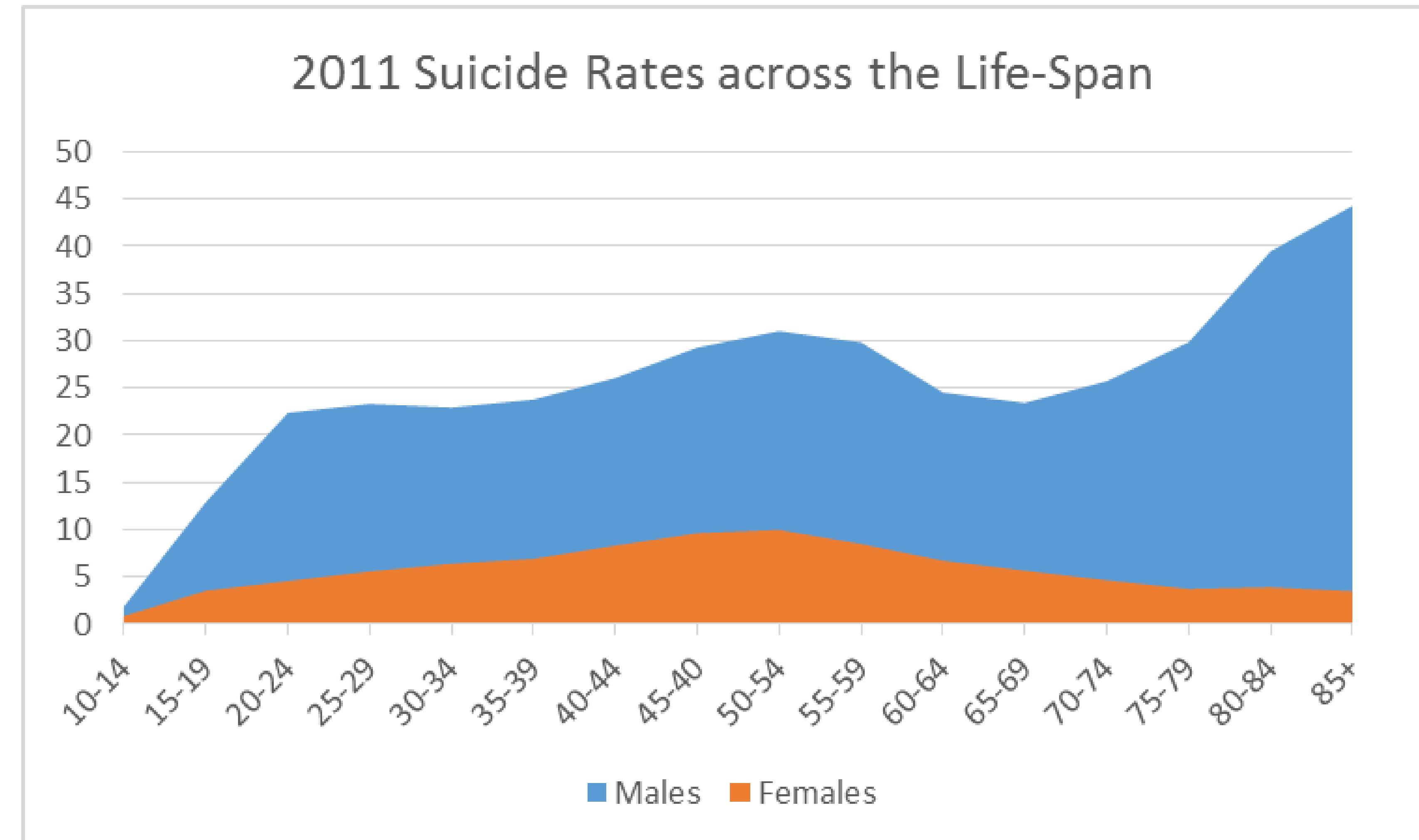
Unfortunately this type of coordinated care is frequently unavailable.



Suicide rates for men over 70 are the highest for any demographic group.

Researchers have long predicted that the number of older adults committing suicide would increase due, in part, to the aging of Baby Boomers.

The primary reason for these higher rates is the prevalence of depression.



So, What Can We Do?

- Many states are beginning to use peer support for older adults.
- Pennsylvania has developed the Certified Older Adult Peer Specialists (COAPS) program
 - Training prepares peer specialists to work with older adults with behavioral health issues
 -

“ peer support is real and it is happening and it is going to be bigger and bigger as we move into the future, so pay attention”

Joe Pamphilon, Senior Project Worker, CLEAR Peer Support Project



COAPS

The program is based on the premise of mutuality, the idea that the supporter and the person receiving support are equal and that their relationship is reciprocal.

Older adults face many different stressors than younger adults. A certified older adults peer specialist is specifically prepared to work in issues of aging and the principles of wellness and coaching



COAPS

- The program prepares older adult peer specialists to provide hope, empowerment, choices and opportunities through support and shared experience.
- COAPS are prepared to work with individuals in a variety of settings, such as senior centers and housing units and in health clinics



Reclaiming Joy

- In a pilot evaluation, published in *The Gerontologist* in 2013, the authors developed a peer support intervention for older adults, Reclaiming Joy.
- Stigma and lack of access to services create significant barriers to mental health treatment for older adults living in the community.
- The program consisted of pairing an older adult volunteer, with lived experience with a participant (older adult who receives peer support).
- The volunteers are trained in a strength-based approach, mental health and aging, goal setting and attainment, community resources, and safety.
- Participant/volunteer pairs met once a week for 10 weeks
- Participants established and worked towards goals that would improve their mental health and well-being. (Chapin, et al. 2013)



Reclaiming Joy

- Thirty-two participants completed the intervention.
- Pre/post assessments showed statistically significant improvement for depression but not for symptoms of anxiety.
- Quality-of-life indicators for health and functioning also improved for participants with symptoms of both depression and anxiety.

The implications of the pilot were that the Reclaiming Joy peer support intervention has potential for reducing depression and increasing quality of life in low-income older adults with co-occurring physical health conditions. (Chapin, et al. 2013)



In The State of Mental Health and Aging in America published by the Center for Disease Control and the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors it states:

“The presence of depressive disorders often adversely affects the course and complicates the treatment of other chronic diseases.”

Depression is the most prevalent mental health problem among older adults. Peer support connects people to their communities and resources. Social connections and opportunities to continue to participate in their communities are highly effective in overcoming depression and loneliness.



- Adequate social and emotional support is associated with reduced risk of mental illness, physical illness, and mortality.
- Approximately one-fifth of Hispanic and other, non-Hispanic adults age 65 years or older reported that they were not receiving the support they need, compared to about one-tenth of older white adults.
- Among adults age 50 or older, men were more likely than women to report they “rarely” or “never” received the support they needed (11.39% compared to 8.49%).

Many older adults do not seek treatment for depression because they believe that depression is something everyone experiences and should be able to deal with on their own.



The peer support workforce has grown tremendously and while the average age is going down, many of the most effective and experienced peers are aging Baby Boomers.



When older adult peer specialists are given the opportunity for training in the specific skills of working with other older adults they represent a powerful asset for improving and even saving lives of their contemporaries.



Silver Impact Inc.

In Lauderhill, Florida Silver Impact has served the older adult mental health community for many years.

They support recovery through intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging programs.

They provide peer support outreach that connects socially isolated, elderly people in Broward County.

Other similar programs are springing up across the country.



You can't go back and change the beginning,
but you can start where you are
and
change the ending
C. S. Lewis



Community is the answer!



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