

Older Adults at Greatest Risk for Suicide

By SPAN-California

The elderly are at greater risk for suicide than other age groups. Those 65 and older comprise only 13% of the population, but 20% of all suicides. More than 84% of all suicides among the elderly are men, with white males over 85 having the highest suicide rate of any age, gender, or race.

Studies say 75% of older adults who were victims of suicide had visited their primary care physician within one month prior to their death, and 20% of those saw their doctor the day they took their lives.

The stigma attached to mental illness may, in fact, prevent older people from seeking treatment. Charlie Curie, who heads the nation's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, says, "The mental health system is underutilized by the elderly and the greatest barrier may be their generational perception that seeking mental health treatment creates a stigma."

Curie, who spoke in July at the SPAN-USA conference, noted there are 80 suicide victims daily in the United States. To put this in terms of lost life, one could say that "900,000 years of life are lost" annually.

The elderly feel the normal emotional experiences of sadness, grief or loss. But major depression, the kind that leads to suicide if untreated, is not a normal part of aging. It is a psychiatric condition that is both extreme and persistent, and can interfere significantly with one's ability to function.

Moreover, doctors and patients may have difficulty recognizing the signs of depression. That fact alone signals an urgent need to enhance the detection and treatment of depression in this age group.

Fresno County has developed an excellent awareness campaign for the elderly that communicates the message that major depression isn't normal and seeking treatment doesn't create a stigma.

For free brochures that focus on the warning signs and risk factors of suicide, call SPAN-California at (760) 753-4565 or e-mail: markch@adelphia.net

For copies of Fresno educational materials for the elderly, contact SPAN-California board member Leann Gouveia at leann_go@hotmail.com

SPAN-California is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization of concerned citizens and professionals dedicated to the prevention of suicide through statewide and community partnerships.

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