

Older people reluctant to seek help for mental health concerns

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A new Edith Cowan University (ECU) study has found that more than

40 per cent of older Australians living with chronic disease would be unlikely to seek help for mental health conditions even if they needed it.

Ph.D. candidate Claire Adams investigated help-seeking intentions for [mental health](#) services by older Western Australians' living with [chronic conditions](#) such as [cardiovascular disease](#), respiratory disease including asthma, and type 2 diabetes.

The study involved 108 people aged 65 years and older living with chronic disease. Participants were asked about their attitudes and beliefs towards seeking help for [mental health concerns](#), and information on their past engagement with [mental health services](#), quality of life, physical and mental health.

Ms Adams found that 41 per cent of older adults with chronic disease did not intend to seek help for their mental health, even if they needed to.

"One in seven Australians is aged over 65. But while we're living longer, we're not necessarily living better or happier," Ms Adams said.

"While it's encouraging that most participants (59 per cent) did say they would seek help if they needed it, a high proportion did not, which is concerning given our aging population."

Internal beliefs are key

Ms Adams said the strongest predictor of whether people would access mental health support was their own beliefs about whether speaking with their doctor was likely to be personally beneficial.

"If people believed that speaking to their doctor would be useful, they were more likely to be willing to seek help, whereas people who were

sceptical about the benefits were less likely to seek help," Ms Adams said.

Society's influence and physical capability also factors

Participants were also asked about how they thought society would view them seeking help for mental health, and whether that would influence their decision.

"If they believed that family and friends would not support them it was likely to prevent them from wanting to speak out about their mental health," Ms Adams said.

"Another barrier was whether they believed they were physically incapable of accessing services."

Ms Adams said mental health challenges were becoming increasingly prevalent in Australia, and around the world.

"We know that older people with chronic disease are at risk of mental health decline, so it's important that they engage with [support services](#) early to reduce severe mental health problems and improve their quality of life," she said.

"This study demonstrates that attitudinal change is required to increase help-seeking in older people with chronic disease."

To address this issue Ms Adams has developed an intervention to promote help-seeking for mental health problems among older adults with chronic disease. It is currently being tested across Australia.

The paper 'Help-seeking for mental health problems among older adults with chronic disease: an application of theory of planned behaviour' is

published in the *Australian Journal of Psychology*.

More information: Claire Adams et al, Help-seeking for mental health problems among older adults with chronic disease: an application of the theory of planned behaviour, *Australian Journal of Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/00049530.2021.1952850](https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1952850)

Provided by Edith Cowan University

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