

Research Paper

Are the Elderly Over-Burdened by Depression? - An Exploration of the Common Mediating Factors Along the Coasts of South India

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ABSTRACT

Old age is viewed as a challenging and vulnerable period of one's life when they become progressively dependent on others. Depression refers to a heterogeneous set of phenomena ranging from simple mood swings to severe affective state. The study explored the effect of age on mental health status along with the mediating effects of various socio-demographic factors on the development of depressive symptoms among the elderly (age >60 years) residing in coastal regions of southern India. A pre-tested questionnaire consisting of socio-demographic details and WHO GDS-30 (World Health Organization - Geriatric Depression Scale 30) was used. The overall prevalence of depression was noted to be 56.3% (n=58), where 23.3% (n=24) were classified under severe depression. A high burden of depression was noted among the elderly in the present study. Some of the mediating factors were identified to be current living environment, educational status and marital status.

Keywords: Mental Health, Ageing, Depression

Ageing can be described as “the regular changes that occur in mature genetically representative organism living under reprehensive environmental conditions as they advance in chronological age”.⁽¹⁾ Old age has been viewed, as a challenging and vulnerable period of one's life when they become progressively dependent on others.⁽²⁾ Ageing escalates vulnerability by causing a drop in undertakings and income, subsequently resulting in decline in their position midst family and society.⁽³⁾

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Depression refers to a heterogeneous set of phenomena ranging from simple mood swings to severe affective state.⁽⁴⁾ Depression in elderly is quite complex and is even more trying to diagnose due to associated medical illnesses, dementia syndromes and heterogeneity of the population. Arriving at a diagnosis requires clinicians to differentiate between depression and aftermath of different categories of brain injuries and illnesses.⁽⁵⁾

In this paper, we explored the effect of age on mental health status of the elderly (age >60 years) along with the mediating effects of various socio-demographic factors on the development of depressive symptoms in the elderly residing in coastal regions of southern India.

METHODOLOGY

The study population included people aged >60 years residing along the southern coasts of India with a 2-month data collection period. Taking a 21.9% prevalence as reported by Barua et al, the sample size was calculated to be 103 at 8% absolute precision and 97% confidence level.⁽⁶⁾ A door-to-door survey was conducted until the proposed sample size was attained and individuals who were terminally ill and those who were not willing to take part in the study were excluded.

A pre-tested questionnaire was used consisting of socio-demographic details and WHO GDS-30(World Health Organization - Geriatric Depression Scale 30). The GDS was tested for reliability & validity and was compared with the Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression and the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale as a reliable tool with adequate psychometric properties.^{(7),(8),(9)} It was translated to the regional languages, back translated & pilot-tested prior to data collection.

Data was recorded in Microsoft excel and analyzed using IBM SPSS Version 21. Quantitative variables were described in mean and standard deviation and qualitative variables were described in proportions. All categorical variables were compared by Chi-square analysis and $p < 0.05$ was considered as statistically significant.

RESULTS

The mean (SD) age in years was 71.26(3.47) with an almost equal gender distribution showing 49.5% (n=51) of the study population to be females. The overall prevalence of depression was noted to be 56.3% (n=58), where 23.3% (n=24) were classified under severe depression.

Statistical exploration of the common mediating factors among elderly indicated that educational status ($p=0.032$), marital status ($p=0.008$) and the current living environment ($p=0.002$) were significantly associated with the distribution of depression. (Table 01)

Table 01: Distribution of depression among various socio demographic characteristics.

		Depression		chi-square (p value)
		Yes N (%)	No N (%)	
Age in Years	<70	29(28%)	31(30%)	3.72 (0.054)
	≥70	29(28%)	14(14%)	
Gender	Male	26(25.24%)	26(25.24%)	1.70

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	Female	32(31.06%)	19(18.44%)	(0.192)
Years of schooling	<12	46(44.66%)	27(26.21%)	4.57
	≥12	12(11.65%)	18(17.4%)	(0.032)
Marital status	Currently Married	32(31.06%)	36(34.95%)	6.96
	Widowed	26(25.24%)	09(8.73%)	(0.008)
Current living environment	With spouse	29(28.15%)	36(34.95%)	9.79
	With others	29(28%)	09(8.73%)	(0.002)
Financial support	Self	24(23.30%)	26(25.24%)	2.73
	Dependent	34(33%)	19(18.44%)	(0.099)
Co-morbidities	Present	52(50.48%)	35(33.98%)	2.72
	Absent	06(5.82%)	10(9.7%)	(0.099)
Obesity	Yes	31(30%)	20(19.41%)	0.82
	No	27(26.21%)	25(24.27%)	(0.365)

DISCUSSION

In this study, the overall prevalence of depression in the elderly was found to be 56.3% which was very high in comparison to the 34.4% reported by Pilania et al in their systematic review of articles published from 1997 to 2016.⁽¹⁰⁾ The prevalence of severe depression was noted to be 23.3% which is again way higher than the 17% reported by Goyal et al.⁽¹¹⁾ Increasing age was not found to be a significant risk factor ($p=0.359$). Living alone or widowhood was found to be associated with depression ($p=0.008$) similar to that reported by Jeon et al.⁽¹²⁾ This could be attributed to lack of social support and decreased income especially on the part of the women. Significant relationship was established between depressive symptoms and level of education similar to that reported by Taqui et al.⁽¹³⁾ Age, gender and financial support failed to show a significant impact on development of depressive symptoms. This may be attributed to the smaller sample size and distribution of the study participants.

Limitations

Comparatively smaller sample size and the use non-probability sampling should be considered along with all the limitations of a cross-sectional study design.

CONCLUSION

A high burden of depression was noted among the elderly in the present study and with its identical demographic characteristics; some of the mediating factors were identified to be current living environment, educational status and marital status, all of which point towards a need to strengthen social support for the elderly. Findings from this paper points towards the need for further studies on effect of social interventions for the mental health of the elderly and incorporation of the same into the existing national programs related to care for the elderly.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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