

Illustration of the Impact of Psychosocial Problems on the Overall Health of an Older Person

Psychological and social problems can have a significant impact on the lives of older adults, often influencing the development and course of acute and chronic illnesses. Take, for example, the following hypothetical case scenario:

Mr. Smith is an 83-year old retired salesman residing in New York City. Between the expense of living alone in Manhattan and paying for the medications and co-payments for medical visits to manage his diabetes and emphysema, he just barely meets his monthly expenses. Married for over 50 years, his wife died 6 months ago. Now, without other family or friends, he feels helpless to check his own blood sugars, follow his prescribed diet or go for walks as he did with her. Each night, alone in the quiet of his kitchen, he drinks wine and ponders the value of his life, wondering if it is worth living.

In this case example, Mr. Smith is experiencing grief from loss, social isolation, financial stress, depression, suicidal ideation, and alcohol abuse—all serious problems conspiring to worsen his already compromised health status. These are just some of the many psychological and social adversities older persons confront, known as **psychosocial problems**. Effective and timely responses to these difficult life circumstances can help older adults achieve **psychosocial health**. In this example, Mr. Smith, with increased social supports, mental health care and access to benefits can live an active, engaged and independent lifestyle in the community.

Information about these psychosocial problems and evidence-based solutions are alarmingly lacking in professional training programs. For example, primary care providers are well positioned to address psychosocial risk factors that might otherwise go unnoticed because older adults regularly visit their practices. But this often does not occur: Medical training at all levels (medical students, residents, fellows and practicing physicians) does not foster the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for effective psychosocial practice.

The National Academy for Psychosocial Health on Aging (NAPHA), through the integration of comprehensive programs in *research, clinical care and teaching*, aims to promote and secure psychosocial health for all older adults and their caregivers.