

Understanding Anxiety & Depression in Older Adults

Dr. Anthony J. Levinson, Snacks & Science Presentation, November 26th, 2025

Depression (Major Depressive Disorder)

What it is

- A medical illness that is more than feeling sad or “blue.” Symptoms persist and interfere with day-to-day life.
- A major depressive episode is defined by at least 5 symptoms (including either low mood or loss of interest/pleasure) present most of the day, nearly every day, for ≥ 2 weeks.

Common signs & symptoms

- Low mood; loss of interest or pleasure
- Sleep or appetite changes
- Low energy or fatigue
- Poor concentration, indecisiveness, or slowed/agitated movements
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide

Assessment & diagnosis

- Comprehensive assessment of mental and physical health, history, current medications/substances, and how symptoms affect function.
- Use of standardized questionnaires may help track symptoms.
- Rule out medical causes (e.g., thyroid problems, anemia), medication side effects, or substance use.

What helps

- Psychotherapy (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy, problem-solving therapy, interpersonal therapy).
- Antidepressant medications (often SSRIs or SNRIs). Start low, go slow in older adults; allow time (4–6+ weeks) to see benefit.
- For moderate to severe depression, combining psychotherapy and medication is often most effective.
- If one treatment does not work, try another evidence-based option; consider rTMS or ECT for treatment-resistant or severe cases.
- Helpful self-management: behavioural activation (do more of what matters), sleep hygiene, regular physical activity, social connection, and addressing loneliness.

Urgent help — call 9-8-8 or go to Emergency if:

- You have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself.
- You cannot care for yourself, or you notice severe worsening (e.g., delusions, hallucinations, or signs of mania).

Anxiety Disorders

Normal anxiety vs. an anxiety disorder

- Anxiety can be normal and even helpful. It becomes a disorder when it is excessive, persistent, causes avoidance, or impairs daily life.

Common signs

- Persistent worry or dread; irritability; difficulty concentrating or sleeping
- Physical symptoms: muscle tension, restlessness, fatigue, dizziness, heart palpitations, sweating, unexplained pains

Types

- Generalized anxiety disorder (excessive worry about many things)
- Panic disorder (sudden panic attacks) and agoraphobia (fear of difficult-to-escape situations)
- Social anxiety disorder (fear of judgment/embarrassment)
- Specific phobias (e.g., heights, needles, flying)

Assessment & diagnosis

- Comprehensive assessment of symptoms, triggers, impact on functioning, and medical history.
- Rule out medical causes or medication/substance effects (e.g., stimulants, thyroid problems).
- Standardized questionnaires can help monitor symptoms.

What helps

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) — especially exposure-based strategies — is highly effective for many anxiety disorders.
- Medications (SSRIs or SNRIs) are also effective; psychotherapy and medications have roughly similar benefits for many people.
- Avoid routine use of sedatives or “as-needed” medications; they can cause dependence and may worsen outcomes over time, especially in older adults.
- Helpful self-management: steady-breathing practice, progressive muscle relaxation, worry scheduling, avoiding/reducing caffeine, regular physical activity, and good sleep routines.

Quick list of credible resources

- McMaster Optimal Aging Portal e-learning:
 - Anxiety Disorders: [UnderstandingAnxiety.ca](https://www.understandinganxiety.ca)
 - Understanding Depression [UnderstandingDepression.ca](https://www.understandingdepression.ca)
- Ontario Structured Psychotherapy (free CBT for adults 18+) — Program information: ontariohealth.ca/about-us/our-programs/clinical-quality-programs/mental-health-addictions/programs-resources
- BounceBack® (free, coach-guided CBT for ages 15+): bounceback.cmha.ca
- Find a CBT therapist (CACBT certified): cacbt.ca/find-a-cacbt-certified-therapist
- 211 (local community & social services): call 2-1-1 • 211.ca
- 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7): Call or text 9-8-8 • 988.ca
- Hope for Wellness Helpline (for Indigenous peoples across Canada): hopeforwellness.ca