

beyondblue to tackle depression and anxiety in aged care sector

Depression and anxiety should not be considered a normal part of getting older

The rate of depression among older people living in residential care is believed to be much higher than the general population – around 35 per cent, or one in three residents.

Older people who require a high level of support to continue living in their own homes are twice as likely to experience depression compared to older people who need less support.

In response to these figures and the lack of widespread training available to aged care staff, beyondblue is set to roll out a new national training program – the Professional Education to Aged Care (PEAC) program – to educate aged care workers about the signs and symptoms of depression and anxiety in older people.

The program aims to help improve detection, diagnosis and management of these conditions in both residential and community settings.

Identifying and managing depression and anxiety disorders in the aged care environment can be difficult. Some common difficulties include:

1/ Many of the symptoms associated with depression and anxiety disorders and dementia are common to all three conditions. This makes identifying any one of these conditions difficult. (Dementia is also a risk factor for developing depression.)

2/ To date, there has been little research into anxiety disorders in older people.

3/ Medications may not be as effective in older people with depression/anxiety disorders and dementia owing to their existing cognitive impairment.

However, effective strategies do exist. The PEAC Program promotes strategies, based on research, to care for older people with depression and anxiety disorders effectively – both in residential and community care settings.

CEO of beyondblue Kate Carnell AO said it is vitally important that such training is now available to people working in the aged care sector.

"Prior to PEAC's development, aged care providers were approaching beyondblue to find out where they could access training on depression and anxiety in older people for their staff. Few options existed that we could recommend. It's fantastic that there is now an evidence-based training program to support aged care workers in their crucial work of caring for our elderly. This is great news for older people and their families," Ms Carnell said.

"It isn't an easy job – Australia's population is ageing and along with all the other health issues that come with ageing, depression and anxiety are often overlooked as a 'normal' part of the process. Depression and anxiety are not a normal part of ageing.

This training will hopefully get that across, and result in improved outcomes and care for older people living with these conditions," Ms Carnell said.

"Depression and anxiety should not be considered a normal part of getting older and symptoms of these conditions may often be attributed to other chronic illnesses, but depression and anxiety in older people can be treated and improve the person's quality of life immensely," she said.

As at 30 June 2010, there were nearly 183,000 residential aged care facilities and more than one million people over the age of 65 were receiving some support to remain at home.

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