

Why Hearing Matters for Mental Health and Well-being

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Mental health is an urgent concern throughout the healthcare industry. And it's gaining increasing attention. There's good reason: One in five people are living with a mental illness.¹

Hearing loss, especially when undiagnosed or untreated, can significantly affect mental health. In fact, moderate to severe depression is almost twice as high among adults with hearing impairment.² A national study found that hearing loss is associated with increased odds of psychological distress.³

Fortunately, skilled nursing facilities can mitigate these risks and enhance resident-centered care. One option is to bring ancillary audiology services onsite. Doing so opens the door to interdisciplinary collaboration between staff and trained auditory professionals, better ensuring hearing loss doesn't go undetected and undermine resident well-being.

The impact of hearing loss on mental health

Hearing loss may create circumstances that are mentally and emotionally challenging. The constant listening effort needed to understand what's being said can diminish energy and resilience. From depleting self-confidence to straining relationships and undermining mood, hearing loss has cascading consequences.

Just consider the implications of the overworked brain. People with hearing loss must increase listening effort. That means cognitive resources are taken away from other tasks, such as remembering. For skilled nursing community residents who have memory issues or who are already experiencing cognitive decline, listening-related fatigue can be even more emotionally and psychologically taxing.

Frequently, people with hearing impairment also report a persistent sense of anxiety. They may worry that they won't be able to hear alarms, warnings, or instructions in an emergency. Others become fearful of responding inappropriately to something said due to not having heard it properly.

What's more, communication barriers due to undetected or unaddressed hearing loss can lead to hampered patient-caregiver relationships, which can heighten anxiety and result in delayed or incomplete care.

Perhaps, however, the most insidious harm from unaddressed hearing problems is the isolation that often occurs. Loneliness is a health risk factor, and when hearing loss is involved, loneliness typically intensifies. Communication with everyone becomes difficult.

What can skilled nursing facilities do?

Awareness of the hearing status of residents is important for patient well-being. Teaming with audiology professionals who can perform onsite audiology exams and comprehensive hearing assessments on a regular contracted basis helps maintain ear health. These trained specialists can provide consistent rather than sporadic attention to residents. They also confer with facility staff to uncover symptoms or behaviors that may signal hearing problems.

Onsite audiology professionals further promote well-being by educating residents and their families on options for care and the benefits of hearing aids when clinically indicated. They also can help facility caregivers foster effective communication and greater connection by teaching them proven strategies to use in their daily interactions with residents. Practices as simple as facing the person directly while speaking, giving clues when changing the subject, and rephrasing rather than repeating when the individual with hearing loss doesn't understand can make a meaningful difference.

Addressing hearing health should be a cornerstone for supporting the mental health and well-being of residents within skilled nursing facilities, many of whom are already facing significant health challenges. Comprehensive onsite audiological services such as those offered by the Aria Care Partners team can be instrumental in this effort and in the successful delivery of quality, high-value, resident-centered care.

References

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "About Mental Health."

² National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, "NIDCD Researchers Find Strong Link Between Hearing Loss and Depression in Adults," March 7, 2014.

³ R. Bigelow, N. Reed, K. Brewster, et al., "Association of Hearing Loss With Psychological Distress and Utilization of Mental Health Services Among Adults in the United States," *Otolaryngology*, July 20, 2020.