

Depressive Symptoms and the Older US Worker: The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS)

Objectives

World-wide, major depressive disorder is considered to be the second most disabling condition in the adult population. Lost productivity due to depression in US workers is estimated to cost seven billion dollars annually. Workplace stress has been associated with an increased risk of depression and some studies suggest that depressive symptoms decline following retirement. However, the association between depressive symptoms and occupation in older adults is poorly understood. The number of US workers continuing to work past the traditional age of retirement is increasing. These older adults may be forced to work out of financial necessity, or they may work voluntarily for the social and personal benefits. This study assessed the association between employment status, occupational classification and depressive symptoms in the older (65 years and older) U.S. population.

Methods

Using a subsample of respondents aged 65 and older from the nationally representative 1997-2000 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), reported depressive symptom levels were compared across older workers and older non-workers controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education. Depressive symptom levels were also compared across occupational category. Depressive symptoms were estimated with a confirmatory factor analysis model, which measured reported depressive symptoms based on four depressive symptom indicators removing random measurement error. All analyses were completed with adjustments for sample weights and design effects using the M-Plus statistical package, version 3.13.

Results

Overall, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity and education, older US workers reported lower levels of depressive symptoms than older non-workers. Among older US workers (controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity and education), report of depressive symptoms was lowest among: 1) Farmers, forestry, and fishing workers, 2) Precision production, craft, repair workers, and 3) Protective service workers. Report of depressive symptoms was highest among 1) Private household workers, 2) Machine operators, assemblers, inspector workers, and 3) Technicians and related support workers.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study found that older US workers reported fewer depressive symptoms than older non-workers. However, certain older US worker groups were more affected than others. Since report of depressive symptoms has been associated with significant morbidity and mortality for all older adults in the U.S, the understanding of the social conditions (including work), that affect report of depressive symptoms is necessary for the diagnosis and prevention of depression.