

ICOPE

INTEGRATED CARE FOR OLDER PEOPLE

Psychological capacity



Learning objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

- Explain the care pathways for managing depressive symptoms in older people
- Describe how to assess the depressive symptoms in older people
- Explain how to manage conditions associated with depressive symptoms and provide a supporting environment
- Outline interventions for managing depressive symptoms of older people, both in primary care and in the community



Understanding depressive symptoms

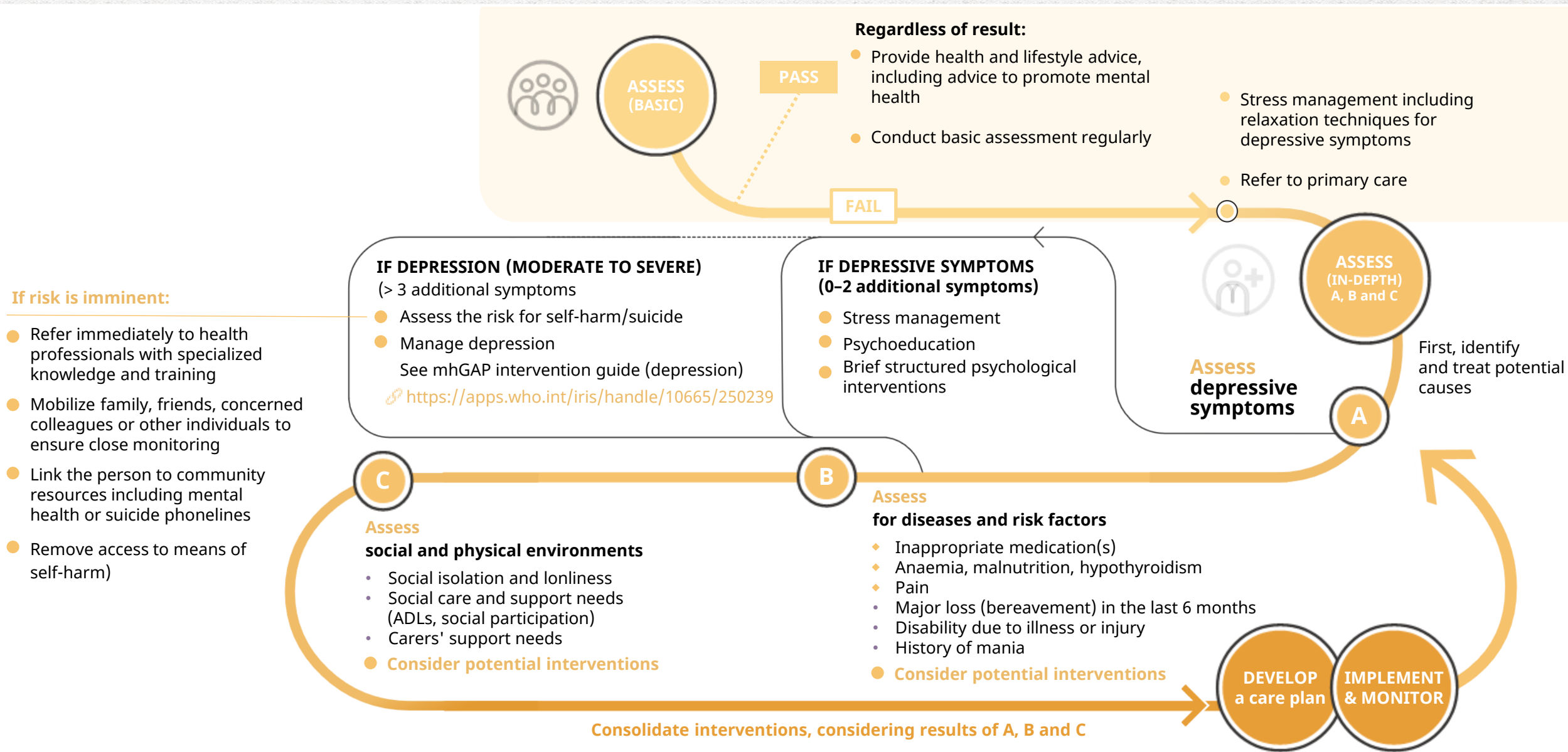
Depressive symptoms refer to the presence of two or more symptoms of depression lasting for at least two weeks. These symptoms do not meet the criteria for a diagnosis of depression.

Depressive symptoms are more common among older people with chronic or disabling conditions, those experiencing social isolation, or carers facing demanding responsibilities.

Comprehensive management approaches should focus on addressing the underlying issues contributing to depressive symptoms.

Depressive symptoms are a clinical manifestation of one of the dimensions of psychological capacity. Other dimensions include anxiety, personality traits, coping mechanisms and mastery.

Care pathway to manage depressive symptoms





Assessment of depressive symptoms

When a person reports ***at least one of the core symptoms*** (i.e., feeling down, being depressed or hopeless, lack of interest or pleasure; see basic assessment), conduct an in-depth assessment.

ASK: "Over the past two weeks, have you been bothered by any of the following problems?"

- Trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Fatigue or low energy
- Changes in appetite
- Negative self-perception or feelings of failure
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in physical movement (slowed or restless)
- Thoughts of self-harm or death



If a person has **less than two** of these additional symptoms, they are considered to have depressive symptoms.

If a person has **three or more** of these additional symptoms, they may present a diagnosis of (moderate to severe) depression.



Health and lifestyle advice

Taking regular physical activity



Eating a healthy and balanced diet



Practising stress reduction techniques



Getting good quality sleep



Maintaining social connection



Avoiding and reducing use of alcohol and other psychoactive substances





Community-based health care

Stress management

- Community health workers can offer stress management guidance through both self-help and guided methods, including support for carers.
- Effective strategies may involve physical exercise, restorative sleep and spending quality time with loved ones, all tailored to individual preferences.
- Quick techniques like deep breathing, stretching and muscle relaxation can also minimize the effects of stress.
- Daily practice strengthens resilience and helps establish routines for difficult times.



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Interventions to manage depressive symptoms

If depressive symptoms

- Stress management
- Psychoeducation
- Brief structured psychological interventions

If depression (moderate-to-severe)

- Assess the risk for self-harm/suicide.
- Manage depression (*mhGAP intervention guide*).

If risk for self-harm is imminent

- Refer immediately to specialized care.
- Mobilize family, friends or others to ensure close monitoring.
- Remove access to means of self-harm.
- Link the person to community resources, including mental health or suicide phone lines



When specialized knowledge and training are needed

- Imminent risk of self-harm or suicide
- Management of bipolar disorder or psychosis
- Provision of structured psychological interventions
- Management of chronic pain



Interventions for diseases and risk factors



Inappropriate medication(s)

Review medications and withdraw or prescribe alternatives.



Anaemia, malnutrition, hypothyroidism

Manage clinical conditions.



Pain

Assess and manage pain.



Recent loss (bereavement)

Provide advice for culturally appropriate mourning processes.



History of mania

See the mhGAP intervention guide (psychoses).



Disability due to illness or injury

Advise on stress reduction and strengthening social support.



Interventions for social and physical environments

Social isolation and loneliness

Identify and tackle social isolation and loneliness.



Carers' support needs

Provide psychoeducation and psychosocial support.



Social care and support needs

- Support tasks of daily living.
- Encourage participation in community activities.



Summary



- After having identified core symptoms of depression, explore additional symptoms during the in-depth assessment.
- Be aware of conditions that may be associated with depressive symptoms in older persons, such as inappropriate medication(s), anaemia, malnutrition, hypothyroidism and chronic pain.
- It is important to promote social engagement to avoid isolation and loneliness.
- The management of depressive symptoms follows a stepped care approach and includes:
 - Stress management
 - Psychoeducation
 - Brief, structured psychological interventions

References

1. Psychological interventions implementation manual: integrating evidence-based psychological interventions into existing services. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/376208>). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
2. mhGAP intervention guide for mental, neurological and substance use disorders in non-specialized health settings: Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP), version 2.0. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2016 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/250239>). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
3. Field test version: mhGAP community toolkit: Mental Health Gap Action Programme (mhGAP). Geneva: World Health Organization; 2019 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/328742>). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
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5. Doing what matters in times of stress: an illustrated guide. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020 (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/331901>). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.