

Washington State

The Program to Encourage Active Rewarding Lives for Seniors (PEARLS) Beats Depression in Older Adults

Producing Results

PEARLS was associated with reduced depression in 43% of seniors who participated in a pilot phase of the program and with complete elimination of symptoms for more than 33% of participants. The University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center is working with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services to assess whether PEARLS should be implemented statewide among older adults who receive social case management. The center is also working with the Washington State Unit on Aging to develop a PEARLS implementation toolkit, and with local agencies to train social services staff to provide PEARLS counseling.

Public Health Problem

Depression affects 15%-20% of older adults and is known to profoundly compromise health and quality of life. People who are socially isolated and in frail health are especially at risk for depression. Doctors and their older patients often incorrectly assume that depression is an unavoidable consequence of aging, and many depressed older adults do not receive treatment.

Taking Action

The University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center (HPRC) worked with the City of Seattle's Aging and Disability Services Division and Senior Services of Seattle/King County to develop and test a program to reduce depressive symptoms among homebound, chronically ill, and frail low-income older adults.

The Program to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives for Seniors (PEARLS) helps older adults define the factors contributing to their depression and develop their own solutions. It also helps them plan pleasurable events and schedule social and physical activities. In the study phase of PEARLS, 43% of seniors who participated in the program reported less depression and more than 33% of participants reported they were no longer depressed.

Implications and Impact

The HPRC is working with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services to assess whether PEARLS should be implemented statewide among older adults who receive social case management and is working with the Washington State Unit on Aging to develop a PEARLS implementation toolkit. The HPRC is also working with local agencies to train social services staff to provide PEARLS counseling. The City of Seattle's Aging and Disability Services Division and Seattle's Northshore Senior Center are already using the program. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration includes PEARLS on its National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. Researchers at the HPRC are working to adapt PEARLS for use with older adults who have epilepsy.