

**The Prevention Research Center:
PEARLS (Program to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives for Seniors)**

PEARLS reduces minor depression among older adults by teaching participants behavioral techniques during in-home counseling sessions. The program has been proven to reduce depression and hospital visits, and has been recognized in the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices.

Lead Agency:

Prevention Research Centers Program

Agency Mission:

The Prevention Research Centers work as an interdependent network of community, academic, and public health partners to conduct prevention research and promote the wide use of practices proven to promote good health.

Principal Investigator:

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Partner Agencies:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion,
Division of Adult and Community Health,
City of Seattle Aging and Disability Services
Senior Services of Seattle/King County
Washington State Unit on Aging
Washington State Aging and Disability Services Administration
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

General Description:

PEARLS aims to reduce minor depression and resulting disability among older adults by teaching them depression management techniques. It consists of eight in-home counseling sessions followed by monthly telephone calls for 6 months. The counseling covers three behavioral approaches to managing depression: 1) Participants are taught a set of steps they can use to solve their problems — from clearly defining the problem to implementing their chosen solution. These steps help participants recognize symptoms of depression and understand the link between unsolved problems and depression. 2)

Participants are encouraged to meet recommended levels of social and physical activity by using community settings, such as senior centers. 3) Participants are taught to identify and participate in activities pleasurable to them. The intervention was shown to significantly reduce depression and has been listed in the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, a service of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. King County now offers the program to seniors who receive social services and have minor depression, and the program is available via an online toolkit for wide dissemination.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

Local participants report having benefited from the program. It has the potential to substantially improve health and quality of life for older adults who suffer from minor depression or dysthymia, and are receiving social case management services. Because dissemination can occur within existing community social services programs, eligible older adults could be readily identified and enrolled in the program. Moreover, because most social services agencies have access to mental health experts who could supervise training of staff and the implementation of PEARLS, the program does not require large increases in local funding. Thus PEARLS has the potential to benefit many ill, disabled, and frail older adults.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

Minor 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 elders do not receive treatment.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

After one year, 43% of seniors in the intervention group reported at least a 50% decline in depressive symptoms. Only 15% of seniors in the control group reported the same decline. Depression resolved completely for 36% of PEARLS participants, compared with 12% of nonparticipants. PEARLS participants experienced significant improvements in functional and emotional well-being. Current efforts are focused on replicating the PEARLS program, making it available to a broad range of older adults and to all adults with chronic medical conditions.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

Researchers have made a PEARLS Toolkit available online, so the program can be implemented in any community in the United States.