

Clinical effectiveness of interventions for treatment-resistant anxiety in older people: a systematic review

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Plain English summary

Interventions for treatment-resistant anxiety

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Plain English summary

Anxiety and related disorders include generalised anxiety disorder, obsessive–compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and phobic disorders (an intense fear of an object or situation). These disorders share psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety, but each disorder has its own set of characteristic symptoms. Most people with an anxiety disorder are diagnosed by the age of 40 years, but a few people will develop an anxiety disorder at older age (after the age of 65 years). Anxiety disorders can be difficult to recognise in older people, as there is the perception that older people are generally more worried than younger adults. In addition, older people are often reluctant to acknowledge that they are experiencing a mental health problem. It is estimated that the number of older people with an anxiety disorder is between 3 and 14 out of every 100 older people.

Treatments for anxiety include psychological therapies, pharmacological treatments and complementary therapies. Choosing a treatment for an older person with anxiety can be complicated. Older people typically have several medical conditions that need treatment and, because of the number of medications they are potentially taking, are at an increased risk of having side effects to potential treatments for anxiety. Some people will continue to feel anxious after initial treatment, which is known as treatment-resistant anxiety. In younger people, adding a second psychotropic drug to a first drug has been found to lower anxiety in some disorders. However, it is not known whether this treatment strategy is effective in older people.

At this time, there is little research on treatment-resistant anxiety in older people, and there is no resource that summarises the evidence for how effective the various therapies available are at treating treatment-resistant anxiety disorders in older people or how they compare against each other. This systematic review aimed to assess how well the treatments for treatment-resistant anxiety work in older people and how they compare with each other in improving the symptoms of anxiety. Other goals were to assess the adverse effects associated with the various treatments and to identify gaps in the evidence available. The project team searched the literature for evidence around the effectiveness of treatments and any side effects associated with them. No study assessing treatments for treatment-resistant anxiety in older adults was identified, underscoring the lack of research in this clinical area.

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