

Don't worry, be a senior? The linguistic labelling of late-life depression in major Australian newspapers

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While there has been a substantial amount of medical research on depression and anxiety in Australia, it has been recognized that late-life depression is little researched (Gonçalves et al. 2011). These illnesses are still shrouded in taboo (Allan and Burridge 2006; Griffiths et al. 2008), and the stigma is very strong among older adults.

Our research investigates one of the possible contributing factors to this stigmatization process: the frames elicited by the language used to talk about older adults. Since the late 1980s, there has been a reconceptualization of ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1987), which is also reflected in the labels that are being used for older adults. Research indicates that certain labels, such as *seniors* frame older adults more positively (e.g., “like to travel” and “lead an involved and active life”) than *the elderly* (who are believed to be “frail and fall more often” and “are often victims of mental and physical abuse”), for example (Benczes et al. 2018; Allan et al. 2021). Ageing successfully – and joining the group of *seniors* rather than *the elderly* – is not compatible with experiencing mental health issues.

Thus, we hypothesize that late-life depression is framed more “positively” with reference to *seniors* as compared to *the elderly*, depending on the constructions that the keywords appear in. To demonstrate linguistic labelling on the coverage of late-life mental illness, we adopt a corpus-based approach to investigate common labels for old age and older adults (*elderly* and *seniors*), along with the terms *depression* and/or *depressed*. By way of illustration, *The West Australian* notes that “seniors live with depression,” while “depression is common in the elderly.” The examples show a closer connection between depression and the elderly, as depression can be found “in them.” At the same time, depression is something *seniors* only live with, implying a more transitory and less permanent condition. Our study draws on newspaper articles published by eight major Australian daily newspapers: one national newspaper (*The Australian*) and one from each of the respective state (*The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The West Australian*, *The Mercury*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Advertiser*, *Northern Territory News*) between 1987 and 2022, 1987 being the year that the term “successful ageing” was introduced by Rowe and Kahn’s (1987) seminal paper.

By shedding light on the coverage of late-life mental illness in Australian news media over the time span of the past 35 years, the paper thus contributes to the study of how frames can affect the tabooing and stigmatization process of late-onset depression.

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