

LATE-LIFE AGORAPHOBIA: A HIDDEN CAUSE OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND SUICIDAL RISK?

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Agoraphobia in the elderly has received little attention, being considered to be principally a disorder of young adulthood . Clinical reports have suggested, however, that this form of phobia is commonly overlooked in the elderly; unwillingness to go outside the home being easily attributed to poor health and loss of social networks . Undetected agoraphobia in the elderly is highly unlikely to improve spontaneously, however, treatment of agoraphobia with cognitive-behavioural therapies and psychotropics has been proven to be highly successful at all ages.

As part of the ESPRIT study of life-time psychiatric disorder, 1968 persons aged 65 and above were randomly recruited from the electoral rolls of the district of Montpellier. Prevalent and incident agoraphobia diagnosed by a standardized psychiatric examination and validated by a clinical panel was assessed at base-line and over 4 year follow-up.

Results show agoraphobia to have a high prevalence in the elderly and unlike younger cases, late-onset cases are not more common in women, and are not associated with panic attacks, suggesting a late-life sub-type. Severe depression, trait anxiety and poor visuospatial memory are the principal risk factors for late-onset agoraphobia. Our findings argue in favor of a late-life sub-type.