Depression and Loneliness Among the Elderly Poor

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The mental health of the elderly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) is a largely neglected subject, both by policy and research. We combine data from the health and retirement family of surveys in seven LMICs (plus the US) to document that depressive symptoms among those aged 55 and above are more prevalent in those countries and increase sharply with age. Depressive symptoms in one survey wave are associated with a greater decline in functional abilities and higher probability of death in the next wave. Using data from a panel survey we conducted in Tamil Nadu with a focus on elderly living alone, we document that social isolation, poverty, and health challenges are three of the leading correlates of depression. We discuss potential policy interventions in these three domains, including some results from our randomized control trials in the Tamil Nadu sample.

**Url:**<https://www.nber.org/papers/w30330>