

# CALL TO ACTION: EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ABOUT DELIRIUM

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"A delirium factory" is how authors described intensive care units filled with critically ill patients diagnosed with COVID-19 (Kotfis et al., 2020). Case studies highlight COVID-19 positive patients presenting in the emergency department solely with delirium and no other signs and symptoms of the infection (Alkeridy et al., 2020). These findings are just one more indicator of the significance of early recognition and treatment of patients with delirium.

Delirium is an acute change in mental status with fluctuating behavior, inability to sustain attention, and either change in level of consciousness from somnolent to hyperaware or disorganized or incoherent thinking (Inouye et al., 1990). Some of the factors that precipitate delirium include acute infection, especially of the respiratory or urinary tract; dehydration; medications; electrolyte imbalances; oxygenation issues; acute injury or surgery; and brain injury. A few predisposing factors for delirium include older age, sensory impairment, sleep disturbance, isolation, and neurocognitive disorder at any stage (Hshieh, Inouye, & Oh, 2018).

Delirium often goes unrecognized in older adults due to its fluctuating nature and inaccurate attribution of the behavior. Changes in behavior of an older adult may be dismissed as being tired, misspeaking, or being upset. But subtle and not so subtle manifestations of delirium are a medical emergency. Early recognition of delirium and correction or treatment of its cause can make a difference in the individual's health outcomes (Cipriani et al., 2020).

There may be difficulties in educating the public, as many health care providers continue to be confused about delirium assessment and recognition. Regardless, family, friends, neighbors, and health care providers need to recognize and report when an older adult they know is not acting like "themselves."

They may be unable to follow a conversation or are easily distracted or irritated, which is uncharacteristic for them. These are all signs of delirium.

An older adult can develop delirium in any living situation, whether living independently, with assistance, or in long term care. It is up to us, as Gerontological nurse educators, to raise awareness of the serious nature of delirium in order for a person experiencing delirium to receive the prompt attention that they need. During these unprecedented times where the new normal is social distancing and more self-isolation, neighbors, families and friends who can recognize the acute changes associated with delirium, may just save a life.

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