Late-life depression may be experienced by 20% of older adults. Depression reduces happiness and well-being, contributes to physical and social limitations, complicates the treatment of concomitant medical conditions, and increases the risk of suicide. From 20 to 25% of older adults with dementia of the Alzheimer’s type also experience depression. When dementia and depression occur together, the distress of the older adult and the family is increased.

Delirium and depression, both reversible disorders, are often mistaken for irreversible dementia in the older adult because cerebral dysfunction and cognitive impairment occur with these conditions, as well as with dementia. Careful and thorough assessment of older adults with cognitive impairment is essential in order to distinguish among delirium, dementia, and depression. The beginning nurse may choose to consult with a clinical nurse specialist in gerontology. Accurate assessment is necessary to select appropriate nursing intervention.