Clinical Features of Dementia, Depression and Delirium

Dementia, delirium and depression are the three most prevalent psychiatric disorders in older people (Poutney 2007). All three conditions can have similar symptoms and older people may often be suffering from more than one of these conditions making diagnosis so much more difficult. Delirium is very common and often treatable in older people, especially in those in hospital or residential care and despite the fact that delirium is a common and serious condition it is frequently unrecognised.

Distinguishing features of delirium, depression and dementia.

Feature	Delirium	Dementia	Depression
Onset	Abrupt and sudden	Slow and insidious	Gradual
Duration	Hours/days	Months/years	Weeks/months
Course	Fluctuating	Progressive	Worse in the morning
Orientation	Severely impaired	Variably impaired	Usually normal
Memory	Impaired	Impaired	May be impaired
Mood	Anxious, fearful, apathetic	Apathetic	Low, sad, irritable
Perception	Visual hallucinations	Visual Hallucinations	Auditory Hallucinations
Sleep-wake	Severe disruption	Nocturnal Wandering	Early morning Wakening
Thinking	Paranoid delusions	Error/delusions	Delusions of guilt/ill health

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