

# GERIATRIC PSYCHIATRY FELLOWSHIP: HOW AND WHY TO APPLY

## General Subspecialty Overview Questions

### *What is this Subspecialty?*

Geriatric Psychiatry, a subspecialty of psychiatry, is focused on the comprehensive assessment, diagnosis and treatment of complex psychiatric and neuropsychiatric disorders that occur in late life. Geriatric Psychiatrists provide care for patients and their caregivers at the end of the life cycle, a time when many complex physical and mental health issues emerge. They are experts in understanding and integrating the biologic and the psychological, developmental aspects of aging, as well as the psychosocial stressors commonly seen in elderly. Geriatric psychiatrists integrate knowledge of psychiatry, medicine and neurology in the care of the complex geriatric psychiatric disorders. In addition to this, they develop greater expertise in psychopharmacology having to treat older patients with changes in pharmacokinetics, as well as dealing with medical co-morbidity and medical-psychiatric drug interactions. In addition, the comprehensive approach to treatment of the elderly includes identifying the cultural aspects and ethnic variations that play a role in the treatments and their outcomes. To provide effective and integrated care to their patients, geriatric psychiatrists work with a multidisciplinary group of providers.

### *Career Development Opportunities in Geriatric Psychiatry*

There are many exciting career development opportunities for a geriatric psychiatrist: as a clinician in a private or group practice, as a researcher, or as a clinician educator in an academic program. With the rapidly expanding aging population, with resulting critical shortage, there are many incentives being put forth to promote this field. This is an excellent time to pursue a career in geriatric psychiatry. The Affordable Care Act authorized expansions of these programs. There is a loan repayment program through the NIH. The loan repayment benefits are in addition to the institutional salary you receive for the research involvement at the NIH ([www.lrp.nih.gov](http://www.lrp.nih.gov))

There are multiple awards to help promote the career of a geriatric psychiatrist, such as the Geriatric Academic Career Award program and the grants through the Geriatric Education Center (GEC) program.

### *What kinds of patients do psychiatrists in this subspecialty see?*

The patient population that a geriatric psychiatrist typically sees include elderly with a wide variety of psychiatric disorders including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, neurocognitive disorders with or without behavioral disturbances, sleep disorders, substance use disorders, medical and neurologic disorders with psychiatric symptoms, as well as those with family history of dementia and concerns about their own aging and cognitive decline. This patient population is usually age 65 years or older. Geriatric psychiatrists, however, commonly care for older adults (age 50 years and older) who present with the neurocognitive impairment disorders and/or psychiatric illnesses complicated with medical co-morbidities. At times, symptoms could be secondary to the common medical conditions like chronic pain, Parkinson's disease, diabetes, stroke, or stressful life events like difficulty coping with change; stress; death and bereavement. A geriatric psychiatrist truly understands the family's role in caring for the patient, educates the family about the nature of the illness and teaches them how to best cope with the illness.

### *In what settings do psychiatrists in this subspecialty work?*

Practice settings for a geriatric psychiatrist include a specialized geriatric psychiatry inpatient unit, outpatient clinics, private practice setting, community-based programs, long term care settings, assisted living facilities, and Veterans' care. Some geriatric psychiatrists may prefer to work only with individuals who have neurocognitive disorders. This setting can be either a multidisciplinary memory disorder clinic or a dementia care unit. Other geriatric psychiatrists are more research focused and may work primarily in a research-based model or a combined research, clinical and academic setting. The VA health care system is another popular setting for geriatric psychiatrists because the VA has become a

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national leader in geriatrics training and career development. Also, over 40% of the veteran population is aged 65 or over compared to the general setting in which the percentage is closer to 13%. The VA continues to expand its workforce of clinicians taking care of the aging Veterans.

### *Can I get board (ABPN) certification in this subspecialty?*

The American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (ABPN) offers the Geriatric Psychiatry subspecialty board certification. Subsequent to completing their training in an ACGME-accredited geriatric psychiatry fellowship program as well as having attained the general psychiatry board certification through the ABPN, the fellow is eligible to take the additional certification examination in the subspecialty of geriatric psychiatry.

## **Why Do a Fellowship?**

### *Why do a geriatric psychiatry fellowship?*

With the dramatic increase in the world's older population, multiple studies have repeatedly confirmed the increasing incidence of mental illness among older adults. The shortage of geriatric psychiatrists is such that, by 2030, there will be one geriatric psychiatrist per every 5,682 patients with mental illness. (President's Commission on Mental Health Subcommittee on Older Adults (2003)). As mentioned on the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry website, recruiters also have noticed an increase in number of requests for physicians trained in geriatric psychiatry.

Multiple studies show that career satisfaction is higher when working with the elderly patient population. Because of all the above-mentioned reasons, the practice setting can be individualized to one's passion and lifestyle.

During training, fellows are exposed to the full range of geriatric psychiatric disorders in a variety of clinical settings. They learn about advances in research on aging and geriatric mental health and about the innovative approaches to depression, psychosis, Alzheimer's disease and other neurocognitive disorders, and other geriatric mental health issues. The fellowship program provides many opportunities for teaching and research training to build the next generation of leaders in the field. With completion of a geriatric psychiatry fellowship, there is a significant expansion in career options especially in the academic and research world and an increase in salary. The life style can be that perfect balance of work and life that many physicians consider ideal.

As mentioned above, due to the critical shortage, there are many incentives being put forth to promote this field - this is the best time to pursue a career in geriatric psychiatry. The Affordable Care Act authorized expansions of these programs. There is a loan repayment program through the NIH and there are multiple awards to help promote the career of a geriatric psychiatrist, like the Geriatric Academic Career Award program and the Geriatric Education Center (GEC) program.

### *What type of career might you pursue after geriatric psychiatry fellowship?*

The career choices for a geriatric psychiatrist are plenty and it could vary from being a clinician to being an academician or a researcher. Some geriatric psychiatrists may wish to pursue an academic career in clinical care, education, and/or research, and some are passionate about providing outstanding clinical care to the elderly population in the community. It depends on their passion, their motivation and their training. Many fellowship graduates do a combination of adult and geriatric psychiatry.

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### Specific Subspecialty Resources

*What is the national organization for geriatric psychiatry fellowship?*

American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry (AAGP)

6728 Old McLean Village Drive  
McLean, VA 22101  
Phone: (703) 556-9222  
Fax: (703) 556-8729  
Email: main@aagponline.org

*Should I join and how much does it generally cost?*

AAGP Membership for Trainees –Members-in-Training pay a significantly reduced membership fee (only \$120 per year), but receive all the benefits of full membership, as of 2019. Medical students may join for between \$25-75 annually.

The MITs are also voting members of the AAGP and have their representation on the board of directors through their MIT representative.

*When is the annual meeting typically, and are there trainee scholarships to attend?*

AAGP annual meeting is typically held in March every year.

*Where can I read more about this subspecialty area?*

American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry (national organization)

[www.aagponline.org](http://www.aagponline.org)

American Journal for Geriatric Psychiatry

This is an outstanding journal in the field of geriatric psychiatry, is published monthly and is a benefit of membership. <http://www.ajgponline.org/>

There is a whole list of resources (both clinical and professional) and links to their websites on the AAGP website and the resources are listed by category.

<http://www.aagponline.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=resources&category=Foundation>

For information about practice guidelines and other educational resources, another important resource will be the APA.

<https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/professional-interests/geriatric>

AAGP eNews, the official e-newsletter of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry, is published every other Tuesday and is a benefit of membership.

<http://www.aagponline.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=AAGPeNews&category=News>

*Does the national organization for this subspecialty have a mentorship program?*

AAGP Mentorship Programs - The American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry (AAGP) has several mentoring programs for all levels of trainees including medical students, residents, and fellows for the purpose of increasing exposure to and interest in geriatric psychiatry.

For the latest information on available AAGP mentoring/training programs, please visit:

<https://www.aagponline.org/>

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*How can I get more involved in the national organization for my subspecialty?*

Fellows can be more involved in the AAGP by attending the annual conference that is held yearly. At the meeting, they can be involved in committees designed for trainees, present workshops, present posters and/or apply for awards. They can also work with mentors who are experts in the field and create for themselves a good career path.

<http://www.aagpmeeting.org/>

Members-in-Training caucus is a committee designed for trainees to share their common interest, passion and commitment. One could get involved in various committees as a trainee and get a better understanding as to why pursue a geriatric psychiatry fellowship.

[http://www.aagponline.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=MITCaucus&category=Tools\\_Resources](http://www.aagponline.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=MITCaucus&category=Tools_Resources)

<http://www.aagponline.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=LeadershipDirectory&category=Members>

### **Fellowship Application**

*How do I learn about all the geriatric psychiatry fellowships nationally, and when should I start learning about them?*

The list of geriatric psychiatry fellowship programs is listed on the AAGP website.

<http://www.aagponline.org/FellowshipPrograms>

They are also listed on the ACGME website:

<https://www.acgme.org/ads/Public/Programs/Search>

Start thinking about the career development opportunities and start investigating the fellowship opportunities at the beginning of the third year of residency. Do your research about the programs and find the ones that fit your passion, career goals and lifestyle, apply to those programs and interview based on offers. Discuss the programs with the faculty mentors and the program director for input about the academic aspects and for the personal life, discuss with friends and family.

*When does the application season typically begin?*

The application season for most programs begin during start of fourth year of residency, however, it may vary from program to program.

*Is there a formal Match through NRMP?*

There is no formal match through the NRMP.

*To how many programs should I apply?*

Apply to three to four programs.

*How competitive is getting a fellowship spot?*

If the program has been historically strong, it is better to apply sooner and not delay the application process.

*Is there a research/scholarly activity requirement or completed suggested rotations to get my desired fellowship spot?*

Most programs do not have a specific research/scholarly activity requirement or completed suggested rotations per se. But having scholarly activity or research will boost your application to get into an academically strong fellowship program. Similarly, additional clinical experience in geriatric psychiatry, such as electives in geriatric psychiatry in fourth year, administrative committee involvement, quality

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improvement projects focused on elderly patient care, etc. further exemplifies your passion for the field and makes your application stronger.

*Are there any eligibility requirements or things I must complete before applying/starting?*

All ACGME-accredited geriatric psychiatry fellowship programs require that the applicant successfully completes a four year general psychiatry residency program that is ACGME accredited.

*What does the application typically entail, and how many interviews should I go to?*

Once you identify the programs, correspond and express your interest. Most programs will mail or email their individual application packets to applicants. Along with the completed application packet, the geriatric psychiatry fellowship programs usually request a CV, three letters of recommendation, and a personal statement indicating your interest in geriatric psychiatry. Whenever possible, include in the personal statement any particular area of interest within geriatric psychiatry as well as a general idea of future career direction.

Schedule and attend at least two or three interviews unless you are absolutely certain of which program you wish to attend, and that program offers you a position before your next scheduled interview.

*Is there a difference between ACGME accredited and non-accredited fellowships?*

The American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology offers the Geriatric Psychiatry subspecialty board certification exams only to applicants who graduate from an ACGME-accredited fellowship program following successful completion of an ACGME accredited program in general psychiatry. Enrolling or completing a non-ACGME accredited fellowship does not meet eligibility criteria for ABPN certification in the specialty.

### **The Fellowship Year**

*How long is the fellowship?*

The fellowship is typically a one year fellowship but there are some programs that offer a two-year track which is more research focused. The fellowship is a mandatory one year (usually a PGY-5 year) following successful completion of an ACGME accredited four year general psychiatry program.

*What would I learn during the fellowship year?*

Geriatric psychiatry fellowship training expands the knowledge base significantly regarding best practices in the field, develops a comprehensive clinical management approach to diagnosis and treatment, and facilitates working with multidisciplinary team to develop effective approaches to treatment. The fellow acquires a thorough scientific knowledge about aging and mental health as well as proficiency in the six ACGME core competencies, which include patient care, medical knowledge, interpersonal and communication skills, practice-based learning and improvement, professionalism, and system-based practices.

During the training, fellows typically will develop skills in providing continuum of care across different clinical environments and developing skills as clinician educators. They will learn to function as team leaders in different settings while providing compassionate patient care. They should be able to formulate a comprehensive treatment plan using the biopsychosocial information obtained. The fellows will learn to improve their knowledge, interpret and disseminate new knowledge and learn how to engage in advocacy and development of health policy to best serve the needs of this elderly population. They will be able to develop an awareness of the larger health care system and consult

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appropriate resources for the elderly patient as needed. The training also develops skills in how to identify and manage the ethical and legal issues pertinent to geriatric psychiatry, including decisional capacity, guardianship, advance directives, informed consent, end-of-life issues, palliative and hospice care.

Through full participation of a geriatric psychiatry fellowship program, the trainee would be able to critically appraise the literature, participate in research, can work with dedicated mentors to complete scholarly and research projects and contribute to the expanding body of scientific knowledge.

### *In what settings would I work during fellowship?*

Fellowship training typically involves a variety of clinical settings that include a combination of the following: geriatric psychiatry inpatient units, outpatient geriatric mental health clinics, integrative care experiences in a large geriatric primary care clinic, cognitive disorders assessment units, and long-term care facilities. Within these settings, a fellow will gain experience to provide direct care as well as psychiatric consultation-liaison service for both medically ill geriatric inpatients and outpatients.

### *Are there major differences between the fellowship programs, and if so, how do I choose the right program for me?*

All ACGME accredited programs must meet the essential geriatric psychiatry fellowship training program requirements. Each program is unique in what they have to offer, and the difference may be based on the geographic location (rural vs. urban vs. suburban). While all are established to provide a comprehensive clinical training experience, some may offer more opportunities for research involvement while others allow for a focus on developing a career in education.

The best approach to selecting a program is first knowing what your priorities are for career development. For some applicants, it may be a passion to be an expert on mood disorders in the elderly. For another individual, it might be the program location that is the determining factor. There is a wide range of programs available to develop the future leaders in this field. With the critical shortage of geriatric psychiatrists in the country, the future leaders will have a tremendous impact on the care for the elderly, by providing direct care and by serving as a resource to other psychiatrists and clinicians to improve the quality and access to mental healthcare for the geriatric patient population.