



# Older Adults and Cognitive Problems

This handout accompanies the [online module](#) from the E4 Center on this topic



Older adults may experience and talk about mental health concerns differently than younger adults. Older adults also are at increased risk for death by suicide. Building your understanding about older adult mental health can help you more effectively support older adults (and possibly their caregivers) during a crisis. Be attentive to common life transitions, grief, medical conditions, medications, substance use, cognitive function, and social support, as these can all affect older adult mental health. Check your own beliefs and attitudes about aging and older adults to help ensure that they get the proper support and referrals that they may need. Consult with your supervisor if you are concerned about issues that may need immediate attention or emergency services.

## Key Facts

- Normal aging includes some changes in cognition, such as slowing in processing speed and working memory, along with some changes in thinking through decisions and other complex tasks.
- Delirium and depression can cause cognitive problems, but both conditions are treatable and potentially reversible.
- Dementia is not a normal part of aging. Dementia is more than being forgetful and can be caused by several different diseases.
- Alzheimer's disease and cerebrovascular disease are the most common causes of dementia.
- Psychosis is a symptom of multiple diseases, including mental illness, brain tumors, dementia, and infections.
- People experiencing psychotic symptoms, such as delusions or hallucinations, often believe that their experiences are very real. As a result, they may be at higher risk of suicidal ideation. Assessing suicide risk is critical.
- Use patience when speaking with an older adult who is experiencing cognitive problems, memory issues or psychotic symptoms and allow them to set the pace.
- Avoid contradicting, correcting or filling in blanks to move the conversation along. It is not helpful for anyone to try convincing the older adult that their reality is not true. Focus on support.
- When speaking with an older adult who you suspect has cognitive problems, speak in short sentences, and use concrete, plain language. Pause briefly between statements to allow time for the person to process what you've said. Take care to speak at a normal volume and rate. Be sure to use a dignified tone and do not over-annunciate. Do not use Elderspeak.

**IMPORTANT:** if someone's mental status has changed quickly (in a matter of hours to days) this is a **medical emergency** and it is critical for them to be evaluated in an Emergency Department.

## Practical Strategies

- **Check in with yourself.** Your feelings (worry, irritation, sadness) may impact your ability to understand the older adult's concerns. Most people believe some myths about older adults and cognition (see the Ageism module).
- **Check your assumptions.** Conversations can lead to assumptions that may or may not be correct. Knowing the facts (Do they live alone? Are they safe? Are they suicidal even if they deny being depressed?) is critical for intervention and referral.
- **Refer for an evaluation.** Older adults who sound confused or are having difficulty communicating should be checked to see if a hearing or vision issue is contributing to their problem. If decreasing distractions or using needed eyeglasses or hearing aids does not immediately lessen their confusion, or if the onset of their state of confusion is rapid, refer them for an immediate evaluation. It is possible that there is a medical condition, such as a medication problem, substance use, depression, stroke, or other condition that needs immediate treatment.
- **Reassure.** Cognitive issues, memory problems, and psychotic symptoms can all be very frightening to the person experiencing them and to their caregivers and loved ones. Reassure the older adult that there is help for cognitive issues and some, like depression and delirium, are very treatable.
- **Caregivers.** Caregivers for older adults who are coping with or worrying about their care recipient's cognitive difficulties can benefit from much of the information that is covered in this module. Information, understanding, and reassurance is important to caregivers.

## Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

If the older adult you're working with sounds confused, ask a few basic questions to obtain an understanding of their experience. Remember to ask just one question at a time.

**EXAMPLE:** "You mentioned feeling [forgetful, confused, angry a lot, worried]." "Can you describe what that is like for you?" "How does that impact your day-to-day?"

**EXAMPLE:** "You said [someone is listening in on your conversations/you don't feel safe/the government is spying on you]. That must be very worrisome!" "How do you handle that?" [after response – ask just one question at a time!] "How do you make yourself feel safer or better?" [after response – ask just one question at a time!] "How can I help?"

If you are having trouble following what they say, ask them to clarify.

**EXAMPLE:** "I think you said [repeat back what you think you heard]. I am sorry, but I don't really understand. Would you please tell me more? I want to understand."

Try to get information about any health problems, particularly **recent** diagnoses. This is an important risk factor for depression and suicidality.

**EXAMPLE:** "I know how much health problems can add to stress, particularly if you have had to deal with them for a while. Sometimes, new diagnoses are also really upsetting. I am wondering if any new health concerns are weighing on your mind?"

Ask about their support system, such as family or caregivers, and their living situation.

**EXAMPLE:** "You [have/haven't] mentioned important people in your life right now. It would really help me to learn a little more about your support system. Who is important to you?" [after response, ask just one question at a time!] "How often do you see them?" "How often do you talk to them?"

**EXAMPLE:** "I know we talked about important people in your life. I am wondering, though, if you live with any of them or if you live alone?"

## Learn More:

Information on aging, dementia, causes, symptoms, care and treatment, and lifestyle management.

<https://www.healthinaging.org/a-z-topic/dementia>

Information for caregivers and others about various care options for people living with dementia.

<https://www.verywellhealth.com/resource-guide-9-care-options-for-people-living-with-dementia-4084379>

Information about living with psychosis and providing care for older adults.

<https://e4center.org/resources/clinician-resources/#mental-illness>

Information about psychosis and older adults living with schizophrenia.

<https://www.nami.org/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2014/Schizophrenia-and-Getting-Older>