



Challenges of Older Adult Life and Health

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

- Older adults may experience problems with life and health that include social isolation, physical health problems, chronic pain, caregiving issues, financial stressors, social isolation, and elder abuse and neglect that can occur singly or together. Intersecting identities may deepen the impact of these stressors.
- Caregiver burnout and social isolation can take a physical and emotional toll.
- Unaddressed life and health issues can increase the risk of suicide.
- Positive social interactions result in a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, and belonging. These feelings protect against suicide



Practical Strategies

- **Be fully present with the older adult.** Listen actively, reflect and validate their emotions, and convey your support. Showing that you want to better understand their feelings can help them feel heard. Reassure them that speaking with you about their challenges is a positive step toward getting help.
- **Explore the appropriateness of a referral to a social program.** Ask questions to explore the older adult's living and social situation. Check to see if they are thinking about suicide even if they deny being lonely or depressed. If appropriate, refer the older adult to a community organization that addresses social isolation.

- **Ask about health issues and chronic pain.** Physical health conditions and chronic pain can impact quality of life and well-being. Some older adults may mourn the loss of ability to lead an active life. Physical health conditions and chronic pain increase the risk of suicide. It can be powerful to have someone who really listens and tries to understand their experience. Ask the older adult about their health and what they find helpful in managing their health conditions and pain.
- **Refer for an evaluation.** Older adults who report untreated health issues or chronic pain should be referred for a medical evaluation. Avoid making suggestions about health and pain remedies. If the condition needs immediate treatment, follow your organization's guidelines for making a referral, initiating a safety check, or calling emergency services.
- **Identify barriers to accessing healthcare or social engagement.** Transportation or mobility barriers can limit one's ability to see a doctor, connect with family, attend religious services, or participate in social events. Consider telehealth options, community resources, ride share programs, or other ways they can meaningfully engage with who and what matters to them.
- **Check on the caregiver's wellbeing.** Resources and services often focus on the person receiving care and not on their caregiver's wellbeing. Caregivers who provide support for an older adult with health problems can often benefit from support and health services. Information, understanding, and reassurance are all important.
- **Ask if the older adult feels connected and safe in their relationships.** Ask directly about the older adult's social connections and safety. Ask if they feel isolated or lonely and if they are experiencing abuse or being neglected. Provide resources to increase social connection and follow your organization's guidelines for engaging Adult Protective Services, if needed.
- **Identify an older adult's reasons for living.** Ask the older adult what keeps them going when times get tough. Some reasons for living can include religious beliefs, close relationships with others, and pets. Help the older adult explore what helps them cope during difficult times. Ask if they have someone that they can turn to for support and companionship.

Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Practice using a strength-based approach. Emphasize the older adult's strengths, resources, and abilities, rather than focusing narrowly on their negative feelings, barriers, and experiences.

EXAMPLE: *"What has helped you feel a little better when you are having a bad day?"*

EXAMPLE: *"What small thing could you do now that might make a difference?"*

EXAMPLE: *"I really appreciate your willingness to talk with me about how you are feeling. It takes a lot of strength to reach out for support."*

If health information is volunteered by the older adult, learn how their health or caregiving stressors influence their mood and suicidal thinking. Those who are dealing with health and caregiving challenges can feel very alone and find it difficult to identify solutions to their problems. Social connections are especially important during difficult times.

EXAMPLE: *"Who is important in your life?"*

For caregivers, consider asking:

EXAMPLE: *"Who is aware of your caregiving experiences?"*

EXAMPLE: *"Who might be able to assist you or give you a break from your responsibilities?"*

Learn More:

The American Geriatrics Society provides resources and guidelines for clinicians in providing care to older adults: <https://www.americangeriatrics.org/publications-tools>

The National Institute on Aging has published online Loneliness and Social Isolation — Tips for Staying Connected: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected>

The Eldercare Locator is a national information and referral resource that provides support to older adults: www.eldercare.gov The National Call Center (800-677-1116) operates five days a week.

Connect2Affect features tools and information to help evaluate isolation risk and identify ways to reconnect to the community.

Family Caregiver Alliance has educational materials that may be useful for caregivers: <https://www.caregiver.org/caregiver-resources/all-resources/>