



Depression and Anxiety in Older Adults

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

- Depression is *not* a normal part of aging. Feelings of grief and sadness in response to a significant loss typically last less than 6 months. These feelings are normal, common, and different from depression.
- Although moments of sadness and anxiety are normal, persistent depression and anxiety can negatively impact older adults' health, functioning, and well-being. If left untreated, these conditions increase the risk of suicide.
- Older adults often use different words to describe anxiety, including "worry" and "nervous." Asking more about these feelings and how they are coping can help you understand what kind of help they might need.
- Common stressful life events can increase the risk of depression and anxiety in late life. Some of these events include grief and loss, social isolation, poor health, loss of independence, medication side effects, financial insecurity, and caregiver stress.
- Social support protects against the negative effects of stressful life events. Feeling a sense of belonging and experiencing the support of family and friends during difficult times positively impacts a person's quality of life.
- Effective treatments for depression and anxiety are available and are generally well-received by older adults.
- Adding pleasant events and activities into daily life can help reduce depression and anxiety.
- Research shows that most older adults prefer psychotherapy over medication for mental health issues, but both can help. A primary care provider can provide guidance, prescriptions, or referrals for someone looking to better manage their mental health.

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Practical Strategies

- **Know the risk factors and triggers for late-life depression and anxiety.** Awareness can aid in identifying older adults who might benefit from services and resources to reduce anxious feelings and manage distress. Because anxious people feel uncomfortable, many may be willing to use health care if offered or seek other ways to reduce their anxiety. Be aware that people from different cultures and age groups might describe symptoms of depression and anxiety in different ways.
- **Explore beliefs about anxiety or depression.** Older adults, themselves, and healthcare service providers may be dismissive of the signs or symptoms of depression and anxiety due to their own biases about aging. Exploring beliefs and attitudes about aging and mental health stigma can help you connect with an older adult and start a conversation about follow-up care or services. Remember that depression and anxiety are NOT normal parts of aging.

Learn More:

Anxiety and Older Adults: Overcoming Worry and Fear, prepared by the Geriatric Mental Health Foundation

Anxiety and Older Adults: A Guide to Getting the Relief You Need, prepared by the National Council on Aging

Depression and Older Adults, prepared by the the National Institute on Aging

Four Things to Know About Depression and Older Adults, prepared by the National Institute on Aging

The Beers Criteria, can help guide medication-based treatment of depression and anxiety for the older adult patient.

Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Cultivate Empathy. Convey a genuine desire to understand a person's feelings and validate their emotions. Try to "put yourself in their shoes" to build a sense of empathy. Avoid inadvertently minimizing their response to challenging times.

- Learning about the person's reasons for living can reveal what they value – children, grandchildren, religious beliefs, love of a pet – and how this can be used to support them during difficult times.
- Asking the older adult, "What have you found works and what doesn't work?" or "I appreciate that you're sharing this with me. What are some other things you're doing to deal with this at the moment?" This can provide information about how you might build on their strengths and offer solutions that are aligned with their values, abilities, and resources.

Seek more information. Avoid making assumptions. Ask open-ended questions and invite them to describe their experience in their own words. Asking clear and direct questions helps normalize a person's experience.

EXAMPLE: "You talked about feeling depressed. I want to be sure I understand what you are experiencing. What does your depression feel like?" [Pause and let the person respond – one question at a time.] "What does it feel like in your body when you are nervous?" "How does it affect your daily functioning?"

EXAMPLE: Ask if the person is using substances or alcohol to cope with anxiety or depression. Use normalizing language and tone. "Some people find that they drink more or rely on drugs, prescribed and unprescribed, when they feel stressed out. Have you noticed that you rely more on these things to help you feel better?"

