



# Common Life Crises 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

- The number of extreme weather and climate disasters, such as fires, wind, flooding, and heat, has significantly increased in number and intensity during the past five years.
- Conditions that become more common with age, such as chronic health problems, sensory impairments, cognitive deficits, and reduced mobility, may make preparing, responding, and recovering from a disaster more difficult.
- A strong social support network makes a critical difference when dealing with traumatic events and significant losses or transitions.
- Common life transitions that increase with age include loss of driving privileges, relinquishing ownership of firearms, deaths of friends and beloved pets, and involuntary moves into a new living situation.
- Positive social interactions result in a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, and belonging. These feelings foster resilience and protect against suicide.

## Practical Strategies

- **Use a trauma-informed approach.** Most older adults have lived through significant historical events, such as wars, economic hardships, discrimination, or pandemics, as well as personal losses or abuses that may still affect their well-being in later life. It is not unusual for a traumatic event that was experienced earlier in life to resurface or intensify with age due to factors like cognitive decline, dementia, increased dependency, or feelings of vulnerability. To reduce the potential for retraumatization, awareness of possible triggers should inform how procedures and processes are implemented to minimize distress.
- **Respect the autonomy and strengths of an older adult in crisis.** During times of crisis, immediate relief and stabilization are prioritized using a strengths-based approach. Events that can trigger strong reactions include changes in health status, loss of independence or an inability to drive or own firearms, grief from losing loved ones and pets, and transitions to long-term care facilities. Understanding trauma-related behaviors such as resistance, withdrawal, or anger as coping mechanisms rather than defiance fosters patience and reduces misunderstandings. Be aware that older adults from diverse or minoritized backgrounds may have experienced systemic discrimination or oppression, which should be acknowledged and respected. Work to build trust and reduce conflict to facilitate empowerment, resilience, and healing.
- **Learn and use psychological first aid.** In addition to a trauma-informed approach, it is beneficial for all who interact with older adults to learn psychological first aid skills. The ability to use this intervention equips people from all backgrounds with the basic knowledge needed to support older adults who are experiencing emotional distress or mental health challenges triggered by losses, transitions, and disasters. Using psychological first aid strategies to offer timely care and support during moments of distress can prevent the escalation of mental health issues, promote adaptive coping, and foster resilience.

- **Take steps to enhance safety and well-being.** When carers are trained on how to take appropriate action and offer compassionate, informed responses to a distressed older adult, the outcome is improved. The use of psychological first aid strategies enhances trust and strengthens rapport between trained carers and the older adult. Learning how to assess for immediate risks, such as harm to self or others, connect them to resources and professional care if needed, and promote their use of social support and adaptive coping strategies benefits an older adult's well-being and safety. Trauma-informed care emphasizes emotional and physical safety, which is crucial for older adults who may feel vulnerable or disempowered. Key principles of this approach include considerations of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity.
- **Promote resilience during crisis.** Resilience does not imply the absence of pain, suffering, or distress. Resilient individuals often feel transient distress, but this state is typically short-lived and does not interfere with long-term functioning. Notably, most older adults are resilient, but a small, but significant number of people will go on to develop some form of mental health issues without early intervention like psychological first aid. Although resilience, recovery, and posttraumatic growth are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, they are different concepts. Resilience is the ability to maintain a stable equilibrium when facing adversity. Resilience also differs from recovery, a normal process in which functioning is temporarily impacted but slowly returns to normal within a brief timeframe. Responsiveness and sensitivity of carers to an older adult in crisis can positively influence their short and long-term mental health status.
- **Support opportunities for posttraumatic growth after a crisis.** Posttraumatic growth involves positive, personal growth that results from experiencing a traumatic event. There is evidence that positive psychological changes can occur after a traumatic event weeks or decades after a significant traumatic event. Strong social support, connectedness, and community are promoters of posttraumatic growth among older adults. Social support provides opportunities to gain perspective, reduce feelings of isolation, and foster a sense of belonging and purpose. Older adults who remain socially engaged are more likely to perceive their lives as meaningful and interconnected with the broader community.

## Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

A trauma-informed approach, where the conversation with the older adult is framed in a supportive and empowering way, can be helpful during times of crisis.

**EXAMPLE:** *"What has helped you through tough times before?"*

**EXAMPLE:** *"What small steps feel possible for you right now?"*

If the older adult has experienced a loss or is in transition to a new living arrangement, it is useful to acknowledge their emotions while also drawing on their resilience and strengths. Be aware that telling a person that you "understand how they feel" is unhelpful and, in some instances, harmful. When in crisis, it is common to feel isolated and overwhelmed by pain. Saying you understand can feel dismissive, invalidating, and insincere. An older adult in crisis needs a safe way to express their feelings, without comparisons, as no two people experience a similar situation in exactly the same way.

**EXAMPLE:** *"Losing someone close to you is really hard. It's okay to feel what you feel right now. It sounds like your bond with them was special."*

**EXAMPLE:** *"This is a big change for you. What are some things that help you feel in control?"*

## Learn More:

The Administration for Community Living has posted content describing the use of person-centered trauma-informed care with older Holocaust survivors, refugees, veterans, crime victims, and people after disasters

<https://acl.gov/programs/strengthening-aging-and-disability-networks/advancing-care-holocaust-survivors-older>

For a useful trauma-informed framework, see the material posted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), United States Department of Health and Human Services <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs>

Additionally, the SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center provides a variety of free resources, including online training in Psychological First Aid and Skills for Psychological Recovery [https://www.samhsa.gov/technical-assistance/dtac/disaster-behavioral-health-information-series-resource-center?f%5B0%5D=resource\\_type%3A20584](https://www.samhsa.gov/technical-assistance/dtac/disaster-behavioral-health-information-series-resource-center?f%5B0%5D=resource_type%3A20584)

