

Substance Use and 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 physical changes normal aging causes in the body and brain can lead to a greater sensitivity to drugs as well as a greater level of intoxication and impairment for older adults.
- Older adults are at greater risk for accidents and injuries due to the impact of substance use on judgment, coordination, and reaction time.
- Alcohol is the most commonly used substance for those age 65 and older—and older adults are more likely to be taking medications that interact badly with alcohol.
- Do not assume that because you're talking with an older adult, that other drugs, such as cocaine, methamphetamines, and hallucinogens are not part of the picture.
- Prescription medications, including opioids and benzodiazepines, can be inappropriately prescribed and misused by older adults.
- Substance use can increase suicidal risk behavior in people of all ages.



Practical Strategies

- **Check in with yourself.** Most people have feelings about substance use or believe some myths about aging and substance use. Be aware of your own beliefs about aging, alcohol, and substance use.
- **Ask about alcohol and substance use directly.** Don't make assumptions about older adults and alcohol and substance use. Ask each person directly. If you believe an older adult is misusing alcohol or substances, seek to understand how to help and what resources to provide.
- **Keep it neutral.** Remain nonjudgmental when asking about substance use. Pay attention to your feelings, as they may impact the tone of your conversation.
- **Reassure and reinforce.** Build the relationship with the person by letting them know how difficult it can be to talk about problems and to ask for help.



Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Asking a person about substance use may feel uncomfortable. If the person lives alone, friends and family may not have noticed that the problem has worsened, or they may have ignored the situation because of their own discomfort in initiating a conversation.

Ask directly about substance use in a nonjudgmental way.

EXAMPLE: *"It seems that you are under stress and are struggling. Sometimes when people are under stress, their alcohol use increases which can lead to more problems."*

When talking with an older adult who may have substance use concerns, gain an understanding of their life stressors or big changes in life.

EXAMPLE: *There are so many things in life that can cause stress for us. I am wondering if you have had any recent changes in your life.*

Check in with a supervisor or colleague to learn if your organization has ways to help people who are struggling with substance use. If possible, consult with a social worker, counselor, psychologist, or physician to understand your options and to make an appropriate referral to social services or medical care. It may be decided that it would be better for the professional to approach the older adult as opposed to trying to conduct an informal assessment or intervention on your own.

Encourage changes to alcohol and drug use and reinforce that treatment can be helpful.

EXAMPLE: *"Thank you for being so open with me about your stress and how you are coping. I know it can be difficult to talk about. The information you gave me really helps me to help you. There are effective treatments available that can help you manage stress and substance use. These treatments can increase quality of life and improve relationships."*

If the older adult appears to be under the influence, do not try to reason with them. Speak to the person with concern and empathy. If they become defensive or angry, remain calm. Determine if it is safe for the person to be on their own. Consult with others to determine if this is a medical emergency.

Learn More:

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides information for clinicians, other service providers, older adults, and caregivers: <https://www.samhsa.gov/resources-serving-older-adults>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) also provides a treatment locator where you can filter by programs who serve older adults: <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help>

Narcotics Anonymous is a global organization that provides information to help those trying to overcome drug or alcohol dependence using their twelve-step program: <https://www.na.org/>

Alcoholics Anonymous provides support for individuals with a drinking problem through their twelve-step program: <https://www.aa.org/>

General information from the National Institute on Drug Abuse: <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/substance-use-in-older-adults-drugfacts>

2019 Edition of a toolkit related to substance misuse and mental illness in older adults as well as educational material for older adults. **Get Connected: Linking Older Adults with Resources on Medication, Alcohol, and Mental Health, 2019 | SAMHSA Library**