

Older Adult Life and Health

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



Older adults can be very complex, and it can be difficult to figure out what the person is experiencing. If the older adult you're speaking to is speaking abnormally or appears confused, it could be due to substance use, dementia, delirium, psychosis, depression, heart attack, stroke... the list goes on. Consult with your supervisor and consider whether it's appropriate to request an in-person safety check.



Key Facts

- Older adults may experience problems with life and health that include social isolation, chronic pain, physical health problems, and caregiving issues that can occur singly or together.
- 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.** Be attentive to an older adult's verbal cues and strive to convey that you accept and support them. Showing that you have the ability to understand their feelings can help an older adult feel heard. Validate that speaking with you about their difficulties is a positive step toward getting help.
- **Explore appropriateness of a referral to a social program.** Confirm your assumptions about 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.
- **Learn about the older adult's chronic pain experience.** Some older adults may not have a person in their life who is willing or able to listen to the problems and distress that their pain causes them. It can be really powerful to have someone who really listens and tries to understand their experience. In addition to experiencing physical pain, many older adults living with chronic pain also suffer psychologically.

- **Refer for an evaluation.** Older adults who report medically untreated chronic pain or health issues should be referred for an evaluation. Avoid making suggestions about health and pain remedies. If the condition needs immediate treatment, follow your crisis center's guidelines for making a referral, initiating a safety check, or calling emergency services.
- **Assess for health issues.** A number of physical health conditions increase the risk of suicide. Some older adults may mourn their loss of ability to lead an active life. Physical illnesses can also reduce quality of life and increase the risk of suicide.
- **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 are coping with another person's health problems can often benefit from support and health services. Information, understanding, and reassurance are important.
- **Identify an older adult's reasons for living.** Knowing what keeps an older adult going during difficult times can be useful in helping them think about who in their social support network that they can turn to for assistance and companionship. Reasons for living can also include religious beliefs, close relationships with others, and animal companions.

Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

A strength-based approach, where the older adult is supported in drawing on their strengths or abilities rather than focusing on their negative feelings and experiences, might be helpful for some people.

EXAMPLE: *"What helps when you are having a bad day?"*

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

If health information is volunteered by the older adults, learn how their health or caregiving issues are influencing 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:

The National Institute on Aging has published online [Loneliness and Social Isolation – Tips for Staying Connected](#).

[The Eldercare Locator](#) is a national information and referral resource that provides support to older adults. 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.

[The Strength-Based Approach](#) handout provides questions that might be helpful.

[Family Caregiver Alliance](#) has educational materials that may be useful for caregivers.

