

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. Become curious about your own beliefs and attitudes about aging and older adults. Awareness of common ageist beliefs can ensure your callers get the proper support and referrals they need. Consult with your supervisor and consider whether it's appropriate to request an in-person safety check.

Key Facts

- Depression is not a normal part of aging.
- 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.
- Older adults with untreated mental health difficulties may also notice physical or cognitive symptoms including, but not limited to high blood pressure, memory issues, or fatigue. If a caller reports these symptoms, encourage them to contact their healthcare provider.
- 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.



Practical Strategies

- **Know the risk factors and triggers for late-life anxiety and depression.** Knowledge of risk factors can aid in the identification of older adults who might benefit from services and resources to manage distress. Pay attention to recent life stressors and transitions.
- **Be aware that people from different cultures and age groups might describe the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in different ways.** Older adults may focus more on physical symptoms before sharing emotional experiences.
- **Ask about the caller's beliefs about anxiety, depression, and mental health treatment.** Older adults, themselves, and healthcare service providers may be dismissive of the signs or symptoms of anxiety and depression due to 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.



Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

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

EXAMPLE: *"That is such a challenging loss. I imagine I would be feeling pretty lonely if that happened to me. Have you felt that way lately?"*

Focus on strengths and coping. Learn about the caller's strengths, values, abilities, and resources. Learning about the person's reasons for living can generate clues about what they value – children, grandchildren, religious beliefs, love of a pet – and how this can be used to support them during difficult times.

EXAMPLE: *"What have you found is helpful when you feel overwhelmed?" or "It takes a lot of strength to reach for support. What are some other things you're doing to deal with depression at the moment?"*

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?" [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?"*

Learn More:

This guide, [Anxiety and Older Adults: Overcoming Worry and Fear](#), is prepared by the Geriatric Mental Health Foundation.

The National Council on Aging has developed a guide for older adults – [Anxiety and Older Adults: A Guide to Getting the Relief you Need](#).

The National Institute on Aging has helpful materials about [Depression and Older Adults](#) and [Four Things to Know About Depression and Older Adults](#).