

Common Life Issues 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. 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

- Older adults may experience problems in life and health that include medical conditions, chronic pain, caregiving issues, social isolation, and elder abuse 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.** Listen actively, reflect and validate their emotions, and convey your support. Showing that you want to better understand their feelings can help them feel heard. Reassure them that speaking with you about their challenges is a positive step toward getting help.
- **Explore appropriateness of a referral to a social program.** Ask about health issues and chronic pain. Medical conditions and chronic pain can impact quality of life and well-being. Some older adults may mourn the loss of their ability to lead an active life. Medical conditions and chronic pain increase the risk of suicide. It can be powerful to have someone who really listens and tries to understand their experience. Ask the older adult about their health and what they find helpful in managing their medical conditions and pain.

- **Refer for an evaluation.** Older adults who report untreated health issues or chronic pain should be referred for an evaluation. Avoid making suggestions about health and pain remedies. If the condition needs immediate treatment, follow your organization's guidelines for making a referral, initiating a safety check, or calling emergency services.
- **Explore the appropriateness of a referral to a social program.** Ask questions to explore the older adult's living and social situation. If appropriate, refer the older adult to a community organization that addresses social isolation, transportation, financial assistance, etc.
- **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.
- **Ask if the older adult feels connected and safe in their relationships.** Ask directly about the older adult's social connections and safety. Ask if they feel isolated or lonely and if they are experiencing abuse or neglect. Provide resources to increase social connection and follow your organization's guidelines for engaging Adult Protective Services, if needed.



Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Practice using a strength-based approach. Emphasize the older adult's strengths, resources, and abilities, rather than focusing narrowly on their negative feelings, barriers, and experiences.

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

EXAMPLE: "It sounds like you have really great support from your son. Tell me about other ways that he shows his care and support."

Learn how life transitions, health, or caregiving stressors are influencing the caller's mood and suicidal thinking. Those who are dealing with such challenges can feel very alone and often 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 responsibilities?"

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.