

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. 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

- The physical changes normal aging causes in the body and brain can lead to a greater sensitivity to substances as well as a greater level of intoxication and impairment for older adults.
- Older adults are at greater risk from 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. Older adults are more likely to be taking medications that interact poorly with alcohol.
- Substance use can increase suicidal risk behavior in people of all ages.

Practical Strategies

- **Ask about alcohol and substance use directly.** Don't make assumptions about older adults and alcohol/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. Asking about substance and alcohol use directly is an important step in ensuring that older adults get the support they may need.
- **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.

- **Keep it neutral** Remain nonjudgmental when asking about substance use. Pay attention to your attitudes, as they may impact the tone of your conversation.
- **Reinforce and Reassure.** Build connection and point out the strength it must have taken to reach for support. Emphasize that support and treatment are available and effective.
- **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 a supervisor to determine if this is a medical emergency.
- **Educate yourself.** Learn about how your organization can support people who are struggling with substance use. If possible, consult with a social worker, counselor, psychologist, or physician to understand your options and how to make an appropriate referral to social services or medical care. In some cases, it might be more appropriate for the professional to approach the older adult as opposed to trying to conduct an informal assessment or intervention on your own.



Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Asking a caller about substance use may feel uncomfortable. It can be helpful to practice ways to start the conversation in a direct, nonjudgmental way.

EXAMPLE: *"Sometimes when people are under stress, their alcohol use increases. Have you noticed any changes in your drinking lately?"*

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

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. Provide education about risk and evaluate their behavior related to suicide risk."*

Encourage the caller if they express readiness for change.

EXAMPLE: *"Thank you for being so open with me about your issues with pain pills. I am glad to hear that you are feeling ready to talk with your doctor about this. The good news is that there are effective treatments available that can help you make progress towards your goals."*

Learn More:

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association \(SAMHSA\)](#) provides information for clinicians, other service providers, older adults, and caregivers.

[Narcotics Anonymous](#) is a global organization that provides information helps those trying to overcome drug or alcohol dependence using their twelve-step program.

[Alcoholics Anonymous](#) provides support for individuals with a drinking problem through their twelve-step program.

General information from the **[National Institute on Drug Abuse](#)**.

[2019 Edition of a toolkit related to substance misuse and mental illness in older adults](#) as well as educational material for older adults.