

Suicide

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

- White men aged 75 years and older are at greatest risk for death by suicide.
- Some factors that increase the risk for death by suicide cannot be changed, such as age and race, but others can be addressed to reduce risks, such as social isolation, substance misuse, and management of physical and mental health conditions.
- Older adults are more likely to use a gun to die by suicide.
- Older adults who are socially isolated, experiencing pain, having financial problems, and are feeling like they are a burden to others are at the greatest risk of having suicidal thoughts and behaviors.
- Unlike younger adults, older adults are less likely to share their suicidal thoughts and plans with others.
- Positive social interactions result in a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, and belonging. These prosocial feelings protect against suicide.
- Asking about suicide does not encourage a suicide attempt. In fact, asking direct questions about suicidal thoughts can build trust and destigmatize the experience.

Practical Strategies

Be fully present with the person. Listen actively and reflect and validate the older adult's emotions. Convey your support. Older adults are less likely to disclose their thoughts of and plans for death by suicide, so it is important to ask direct questions without judgment. Showing that you want to better understand their feelings can help the person feel heard. Reassure them that speaking with you about their challenges is a positive step toward getting help.

- **Learn about the person's social support network.** Some people may not have a person in their life who is willing or able to listen to their concerns, understand their distress, and detect that they are struggling or considering death by suicide. Ask about the people in their life and opportunities they get for connection.

- **Check for the presence of lethal means.** Follow your organization’s guidelines for asking about gun ownership, availability of ammunition, and safe firearm storage. Discussions about firearm access can be difficult. Be aware that approximately 37% of older adults live in a home where guns are present. Also ask about accessibility of medication as a possible means. Inquire about types and amounts of medications in their home and if they would be willing to give medications to a trusted person for safekeeping while they are having suicidal thoughts.
- **Assess for health issues.** Many health conditions increase the risk of suicide. People may mourn the loss of independence or ability to be active. If the person has a health condition that needs evaluation and treatment, follow your organization’s guidelines for making a referral.
- **Ask follow-up questions if an older adult denies thoughts of suicide.** Comments such as, “What is the point of living like this?” or “No one would miss me if I was gone” may be cries for help. Check for warning signs of self-neglect (e.g., not eating well or not taking prescribed medications). If concerned, follow your organization’s guidelines for contacting Adult Protective Services.
- **Identify a person’s reasons for living.** Ask the older adult what keeps them going when times get tough. Some reasons for living can include religious beliefs, close relationships with others, and animal companions. Help the older adult identify ways that they have successfully coped in the past during difficult times. Ask if they have someone that they can turn to for support and companionship.



Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Learn how the older adult’s health may be influencing their mood and suicidal thinking. People who are dealing with health challenges can feel very alone and find it difficult to identify solutions to their problems. Social connections are critically important during difficult times. Questions to ask include:

EXAMPLE: “How is your health in general?”

EXAMPLE: “Who is important in your life?”

EXAMPLE: “Who is aware of your health challenges?”

EXAMPLE: “Who might be able to assist you in dealing with your health challenges?”

A suicidal crisis can be intense and unpredictable and can escalate rapidly. Knowing if guns and ammunition are accessible is important.

EXAMPLE: *[remember to ask just one question at a time!]* “Earlier you mentioned that you own a gun. Where is it stored? Do you have a gunlock or weapon safe? Do you store ammunition with your guns?” “Do you have a person in your life who can hold onto your weapons to help you remain safe?” If the answer is “no,” ask if the person would be willing to explore ways to limit or delay access to the weapon in order to avoid making an impulsive, but permanent choice of using it.

Learn More:

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. [Suicide Statistics](#).

The National Council on Aging published [Suicide and Older Adults: What You Should Know](#).

The American Psychological Association published, [How to Talk to your Patients about Firearm Safety](#).

The [CALM \(Counseling on Access to Lethal Means\) online course](#) is free and focuses on reducing the risk of suicide by lethal means.

The [Suicide Prevention Resources Center](#) has excellent resources about older adults and suicide.

The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) has valuable resources for professionals to use with older adults at risk for death by suicide.