

Anxiety and Depression in Older Adults

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.



Practical Strategies

- Know the risk factors and triggers for late-life anxiety and depression. Knowledge of risk factors and triggers can aid in the identification of older adults who might benefit from services and resources to reduce anxious feelings and manage distress. Because anxious people feel uncomfortable, many may be willing to use health care if offered or seek other ways to reduce their anxiety. Be aware that people from different cultures and age groups might describe the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in different ways.
- Ask about the beliefs of the caller if anxiety or depression symptoms are detected. Older adults and healthcare service providers can both minimize or be dismissive of the signs or symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Key Facts

- Not all anxiety is bad. But too much anxiety can negatively impact older adults' health, functioning, and well-being, and it increases risk for 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 triggers for new and worsening late-life anxiety include grief and loss, social isolation, loss of independence, financial insecurity, poor health, and pain.
- Depression is not a normal part of aging. Feelings of grief and sadness in response to a significant loss are normal, common, and different from depression.
- Common stressful life events that increase the risk for late-life depression include the death of a loved one, social isolation, poor health, medication side effects, financial difficulties, and caregiver stress.
- Older adults who are depressed are at increased risk for suicide and physical health problems.
- Social support buffers 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.

It is not uncommon to believe that it is reasonable for an older adult to feel anxious or depressed given their current situation. Learning about their beliefs and attitudes is useful information that can be used if referring them for follow-up care or services. Remember that depression and anxiety are NOT normal parts of aging.

Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

Seek more information. If it sounds as if the caller is using substances to cope with anxiety or depression. Strive to learn more about their use and how it might be changing over time.

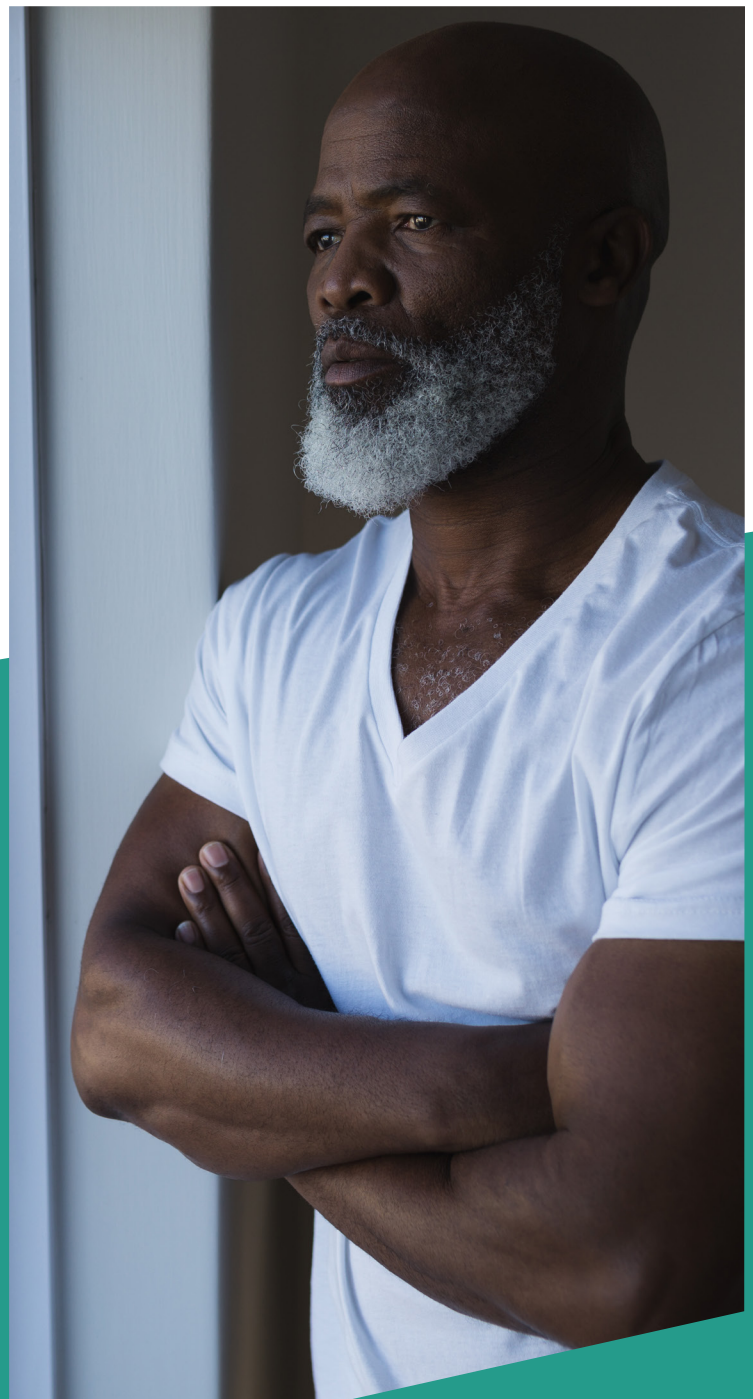
EXAMPLE: *If an older adult caller indicates that they are feeling anxious or depressed, it can be helpful to ask, “how are you managing your anxiety or depression?” Ask the older adult caller, “Have you been drinking, or using medication or drugs to help you feel better?” Remember, the older adult caller has a reason for their new or increased substance use.*

EXAMPLE: *You talked about feeling nervous and worried. I want to make sure that I understand what you are experiencing. Can you tell me what it feels like for you to be nervous and worried?*

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!] How does it affect your daily functioning?*

Empathy. If a caller describes the difficulties they are experiencing, it is important to convey understanding and empathy and not inadvertently minimize their response to challenging times.

- Learning about the caller’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 this time.
- Asking the older adult caller, “what are you doing to feel better?” can provide information about how you might build on their strengths and offer solutions that are aligned with their values, abilities, and resources.



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](#).