

# Mental Health and Aging Well



Struggling with mental health is not a normal part of aging, but many of us treat it like it is. May is Mental Health Awareness Month and it's an important time to recognize that anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders can be successfully managed, allowing older adults to live happier, more fulfilling lives.

According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), about 20% of people ages 55 and older experience a mental health concern. The most common of these being anxiety, severe cognitive impairment, and mood disorders like depression and bipolar disorder. Just as you wouldn't ignore a physical health problem, you shouldn't ignore a mental health problem.

## Depression

When a person receives a serious diagnosis like cancer or heart disease, it's not unusual to feel sad, disappointed, or discouraged. But when these feelings last several weeks or longer, it's time to be evaluated for depression. This condition is very common and often misunderstood.

Depression isn't just sadness or feeling down. It's a serious medical condition that can affect your ability to live your life and enjoy the people and the things you love. It's more common among those who have at least one chronic medical condition. If you or someone you love is feeling depressed, getting help can be transformational.

### Symptoms:

According to the [CDC](#), the following symptoms are common:

- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable
- Fatigue and decreased energy
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts
- Persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not get better, even with treatment

### Treatment:

People living with depression can find significant relief with treatment that includes anti-depression drugs, psychotherapy, or both. See a healthcare provider to begin the evaluation and treatment process.

## Anxiety Disorder

Although it often goes undiagnosed, up to about 20% of older adults are living with anxiety. Anxiety disorder is a condition in which a person has strong feelings of worry, anxiety, or fear that interfere with their daily activities. There are several different anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder.

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## Anxiety Symptoms:

According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH), symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder include:

- Feeling restless, wound up, or on edge
- Being easily fatigued
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Being irritable
- Having headaches, muscle aches, stomachaches, or unexplained pains
- Difficulty controlling feelings of worry
- Having sleep problems, such as difficulty falling or staying asleep

## Panic Symptoms:

According to NIMH, a person may experience these symptoms during a panic attack:

- Pounding or racing heart
- Sweating
- Trembling or tingling
- Chest pain
- Feelings of impending doom
- Feelings of being out of control

## Treatment:

People living with an anxiety disorder can find relief with psychotherapy, medication, stress-management techniques, and support groups. See a healthcare provider to begin the evaluation and treatment process.

## **Bipolar Disorder**

When older adults begin exhibiting symptoms of bipolar disorder, they often are either a

recurrence of a disorder they experienced when they were younger or a brand-new issue. According to [Psychiatric Times](#), mood disorders like bipolar disorder can have different symptoms than those that occur in younger individuals. Unfortunately, these can be easily confused with symptoms for other conditions.

## Manic Symptoms:

- Confusion or disorientation
- Being easily distracted
- Losing the need for sleep
- Irritability
- Aggression

## Depressive Symptoms:

- Loss of interest in activities they enjoy
- Feeling tired
- Trouble concentrating or remembering
- Changing habits
- Thoughts of suicide

## Treatment:

Accurate diagnosis is important to receiving the right treatment for bipolar disorder. Treatment can include psychotherapy and medication. See a healthcare provider to begin the evaluation and treatment process.

## **Suicide**

Older adults are particular at risk of suicide. According to [NIMH](#), although older adults make up about 12% of the population, they make up about 18% of all suicides.

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## Contributing Factors:

The [National Council on Aging](#) lists several reasons that contribute to suicidal behavior in adults. These include:

- Loneliness
- Grief over lost loved ones
- Loss of self-sufficiency
- Chronic illness or pain
- Cognitive impairment
- Financial problems

## Warning Signs:

Signs that you or someone you love may be consider suicide include:

- Explicitly saying they are suicidal
- Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Giving away beloved items or changing their will
- Avoiding social activities
- Neglecting self-care, medical regimens, and grooming
- Exhibiting a preoccupation with death
- Lacking concern for personal safety

## **How to Get Help**

The first step to getting help is recognizing that you might be able to benefit from some mental health support.

The best thing to do is to talk to your doctor. Say that you are concerned about thoughts and feelings you are having and ask for a mental health evaluation. You can also start by confiding in your family, friends, or clergyman, asking them to help you get the help you need.

If you are in crisis, call 911. You can also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at (800) 273-8255.

## **How to Help Someone You Love**

It can be difficult to watch someone you love struggle with mental health issues. While it can be a helpless feeling, there are many things you can do. These include:

- **Asking questions:** Ask whether they are thinking about suicide or having trouble coping with their daily life. Listen carefully and acknowledge their pain or other concerns. Do not be dismissive.
- **Be present:** Just being in the room with the person can help tremendously. Face-to-face, virtual, or telephone calls can be extremely reassuring and help with feelings of loneliness. Listen and let them know they are not alone.
- **Help them connect:** Check in with those you love and make sure they have a support system in place. Connections with family and the community are invaluable to older adults.
- **Keep in touch:** Do your part to help them maintain their connections. Follow up after you've spoken to them and show that you care.

If you feel the person is in a life-threatening emergency, call 911.

By addressing mental health problems just like we do physical health problems, each of us can stay on the road to a happier, healthier life.

***If you or someone you love are experiencing mental health challenges, Intrepid USA is here to assist. Please email [help@intrepidusa.com](mailto:help@intrepidusa.com) to speak with a Patient Advocate.***