

Improving Mental Health by Focusing on the Little Things



Looking back to 50, 25, or even 10 years ago, mental health issues carried a much greater stigma than they do today. While acceptance and support are at an all-time high, older adults may still struggle with long-entrenched feelings and stereotypes about mental illness and those who are living with the wide-ranging issue.

With one in five Americans (including one-in-five seniors) living with a [mental illness](#), the issue is more prevalent than many realize. Mental illnesses include a wide range of diagnoses on a spectrum of severity. These illnesses can include things like depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment, and bipolar disorder.

According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), depression is the most common mental health problem among older adults. In addition to the expected mood challenges, depression also can lead to challenges in physical, mental, and social functioning and can complicate the treatment of other chronic conditions. Older adults living with depression are more likely than their counterparts to visit the doctor or emergency room more often, use more medication, and have higher hospital stays.

Additionally, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has made many mental health concerns even worse among seniors. [Research](#) has shown that older adults reported increased rates of anxiety and depression during the pandemic, largely due to loss, loneliness, socioeconomic status, and medical concerns.



Despite all of this, it's important to keep in mind that developing depression, or another mental illness, is not an expected part of aging.

There are many treatments available to manage depression and other mental health conditions. These can include medication, therapy, and changes to a person's daily lifestyle. What may be most important is talking with your doctor to get an accurate diagnosis and following up with the recommended treatment plan.

Unfortunately, this can be very difficult for older adults to achieve. [Research has shown](#) that this population – especially those who came of age before the 1960s – is less comfortable seeking diagnosis and treatment due to the historical shame and ignorance surrounding mental illness and psychological problems.

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There are [several ways](#) individuals and the community can work to destigmatize mental health issues. Techniques include:

- **Acknowledge the more challenging aspects of aging.** Don't push the narrative that seniors should embrace their "golden years." It can feel like they are not supposed to show emotions like sadness, anger, and stress as related to aging.
- **Listen, but don't judge.** It can be difficult for older adults to be open and vulnerable about their mental health struggles. Be a safe space for the elders in your life to talk about their mental health, conveying that what they're feeling is not "bad" or "abnormal."
- **Be aware of how you talk about mental health.** Avoid using words like "crazy" or "psycho" in normal conversation. Keeping these words active in your vocabulary can send the message that you will look negatively on the senior in your life who is struggling with mental health concerns.
- **Talk candidly about mental health.** This is especially important if you also are seeking support. By showing that asking for help is normal and not a source of shame or embarrassment, seniors can often find the resolve to do so themselves.

It's important for seniors to prioritize their mental health. Not doing so can interfere with their ability to function or find enjoyment in life, increase their risk of heart disease, lessen their ability to recover from an illness, and increase their risk of suicide.

Symptoms that indicate it's time to seek help include:

- Trouble sleeping

- Changes in appetite and unwanted weight changes
- Trouble concentrating
- Less or no interest in things you used to love
- Trouble performing daily activities and meeting responsibilities

Taking inspiration from the [Little Things](#) mental health campaign, which is recognized each January in Ireland, it can be helpful to focus on the small things you can do to promote positive mental health rather than becoming overwhelmed by trying to do it all at once.

The campaign has identified several "little things" you can do to make a big difference in mental health.

- **Stay active.** By doing something like exercising, walking, or even doing housework, a person can positively impact their mood.
- **Talk about your problems.** The simple act of discussing these issues with others can make them feel smaller. Finding solutions isn't important; sharing is.
- **Help someone else.** Make an effort to be a nonjudgmental ear for a friend or loved one in trouble, or prioritize contacting a friend who seems distant. Being a good listener is just as important as having someone to talk to.
- **Join others in doing something you enjoy.** By doing things with others such as playing a game or volunteering, you can positively impact how you feel.
- **Have a healthy diet.** By maintaining a balanced, nutritious diet, you can improve both your physical and mental health.

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- **Stay connected to loved ones.** It's important to remind yourself that you are part of a community. This can positively affect the way you feel.
- **Drink less alcohol.** Consuming less or no alcohol can improve your physical and mental health, as well as improve your ability to handle daily stresses and challenges.
- **Get a good night's sleep.** By regularly sleeping at least seven or eight hours nightly, you will improve how you feel and how well you can move through your day's demands.

As technology has evolved, so have the convenient options people now have for addressing their mental health. There are many strong apps available to help people with mental health concerns and promote relaxation. Among the best of these are:

- **Best overall: Moodfit.** This app helps users to work on actions centered around topics such as mood, gratitude, mindfulness, and grounding.
- **Best for meditation: Headspace.** This app makes meditation and mindfulness more accessible and easier to achieve.
- **Best for therapy: Talkspace.** Patients can match with the right counselor and get started on their counseling right away. What's more, patients can message their therapist 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- **Best for stress: iBreathe.** Users of this app are guided through deep-breathing exercises to assist with issues such as stress, anxiety, and insomnia.
- **Best for anxiety: MindShift.** This anxiety

and stress-relief app encourages people to reduce worry, stress, and panic through the use of evidence-based strategies.

- **Best for mood boost: Happify.** The goal of this app is to help reduce stress, overcome negative thoughts, and improve resilience. The app is intended to shift away from old patterns to embrace positive new habits.

Using all the tools and tactics outlined in this piece, older adults can receive an accurate diagnosis, work toward improved mental health, and reduce the stigma about reaching out for mental health support.

To learn how you or your loved one may benefit from in-home services, [contact Intrepid USA](#) for more information.