

Aging and Behavioral Health – Accessible Text Version

Welcome

Welcome to “Aging and Behavioral Health.” Additional resources are available by selecting the Resources link in the top right corner of the window. If you have visual or auditory assistance needs, please select the Accessibility On/Off button for help with this training.

The process of aging can be both rewarding and challenging. Some people age with only minor health concerns or complications. This time period in life can be spent enjoying retirement, vacations, hobbies, or more time with family. While many look forward to their golden years, older adults may also be faced with significant health concerns, struggles with financial stability, or behavioral health challenges. In this training, we’ll discuss the world of older adults who brave both the ups and the downs of aging and talk about ways to understand and support them.

WHO Estimates on Aging

The World Health Organization estimates that the next few decades will bring an exponential growth in the global population of people over the age of 60, nearly doubling from 12% to 22% of the world’s population. By 2050, they estimate approximately 2 billion individuals worldwide will be age 60 and over. This population will undoubtedly bring tremendous value to the workforce, to their community, and to their families. To ensure that this growing population is empowered to live life to the fullest, we need to recognize the unique health challenges they may face.

In This Training

There are many phases and changes during the aging process. What may be true for one person in their 80’s may be true for another in their 60’s, and vice versa. However, not everyone experiences changes in the same way. This training covers general commonalities during the aging process without breaking it down by specific decades.

This table of contents provides an outline for what you will learn. In this training, we will discuss the challenges older adults face, barriers to support and treatment, and strategies for aging adults to pursue full, meaningful lives. We invite you to explore the following chapters that address questions you may have about the topic. You also have the option to move freely about the module using the player menu on the left hand side of the window. You are free to start, stop, or pause the module at any time.

Changes with Aging

Part of growing older is going through changes and experiences shared by others at the same stage in life. Changes like retirement can open doors to new pursuits, but it can also be quite stressful. Many find it difficult to make the adjustment and struggle with feelings of



purposelessness or depression. In later life, there is also the challenge of losing lifelong friends and loved ones. Loss can result in feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Physical health challenges may also put limits on once enjoyed activities. Later life, like all stages, presents challenges alongside opportunities for growth, wisdom, and positive experiences.

Loneliness and Despair

Sometimes, feelings of loneliness and despair can lead into a more serious concern, like depression. Many people assume depression is something to be expected when getting older. This couldn't be further from the truth. As people get older, they go through hard changes. It's normal for an older person to experience sadness, grief, or periods of low energy, just like so many others. However, some will experience feelings that last significantly longer than temporary feelings of sadness.

Personal Reflection

It's not difficult to imagine that as we age, we look back at our life and what we have done...and not done. Older adults tend to ask themselves the question: "Did I live a meaningful life?" Ideally, this question brings about feelings of accomplishment and minimal feelings of regret. But for some, this reflection can lead to feelings of regret and despair.

Feelings of Loneliness

While some people experience an increase in social activities, for others growing older means being less involved with friends, family, and other supportive groups. This distance is often not intentional but a natural drift that occurs as months and years pass by. At times, a person may not even realize they have grown apart from others until they find themselves in need of support.

Symptoms of Depression

Depression is influenced by genetics and brain chemistry, an individual history with depression or chronic pain, or stress caused by loss, isolation, or other life changes. One of the most stressful experiences that an older adult might go through is being placed into an institutional level of care, like a nursing home. To know whether someone might be experiencing depression, become familiar with the following symptoms:

- Feelings of sadness or anxiety that last for weeks at a time
- Feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness and/or helplessness
- Irritability, restlessness
- Insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- Fatigue and decreased energy

- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions, and
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts

For more information on depression, we encourage you to explore our module dedicated to this topic.

Depression or Dementia?

Depression can be easily overlooked or even mistaken for dementia at times. With both depression and dementia, performing everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, and even getting dressed can become incredibly difficult to manage. It is critically important that seniors be given thorough diagnostic tests by appropriate medical professionals. Older persons can benefit from loved ones advocating on their behalf for the best possible treatment and care options when either dementia or depression are suspected.

Sense of Touch Never Ages

Touch is the only sense not affected by the aging process. Our sense of touch has a huge effect on our sense of self and how we feel. As we age, we need to be assured that we are loved, and touch is a way to accomplish this. Acts of physical touch like hugs, gentle stroking of the hand, massages, and even intimacy are all important to the aging adult to remind them they are cared for.

Finding Meaningful Connections

All people, regardless of age can pursue activities that bring joy and fulfillment to life. Connecting with others allows the older person a chance to work through negative feelings or the symptoms of any condition in a supportive community and experience joy, laughter, love, and purpose well into the later years of life. Throughout this module, you'll see Wellness Tips containing strategies for how to move away from isolation, toward connection with others, and toward a revived sense of purpose.

Say Yes!

When an invitation to get out and meet others is provided, try saying yes! It may not be the most appealing option on the surface, but you never know when or where you will start a new friendship. Keep on learning. Many communities offer the opportunity to engage in continuing education. College courses can often be taken for free as well. You may also meet and connect with people who have similar interests during these experiences. It's not just Bingo anymore! Senior centers offer so many more options these days to take classes, trips, and engage in activities to connect with others.

Relate to Others



This training is funded by Texas Health and Human Services Commission

Realize that others feel the same way. It can be encouraging to realize you're not alone and that others are experiencing loneliness and seeking deeper connections as well. Stay connected with friends and family. Even when a social interaction feels difficult, even a short one can provide a boost of stimulation that's good for the mind and body. The World Wide Web. Try going to meetup.com and plugging in a zip code. An older adult can easily join an established group of others who are seeking other members, whether for yoga, a book club, or anything in between.

Give Back

Volunteering for a great cause can provide a meaningful and rewarding way to meet others with similar passions and revive a sense of purpose. Keep a pet. If possible, having a pet is a great way to keep something in the home that provides affection to the aging individual. Find passion projects and hobbies. Try identifying interests like art, music, or cooking. Engaging in a passion leads to the opportunity to connect with others who are passionate about it as well. Being retired doesn't have to mean never working again. One way to still enjoy the rest and relaxation of retirement along with the social connection that work offers is to get a part-time job.

Section Transition

In addition to loneliness and depression, there are additional mental and physical health risks that increase among older adults. The next section will discuss additional topics of mental and physical health risks.

Mental Health Challenges

Risk of Suicide

As we age, the rate of suicide risk steadily increases, with the second highest rates in the US among people 75 and older. Increased risk for suicide can be brought about by chronic illness, mental disorders, and pain, both physical and psychological. When older adults lose their ability to live independently, they often start to believe they are a burden to those who care for them. They begin to have the perspective that their death might mean more to their family, friends, and society than their life does. Some older adults may also go through severe social isolation and loneliness. This might look like having fewer friends, living alone, having family conflict, or withdrawing socially. Between the sense of being a burden and feelings of isolation, some older adults carry a huge weight. If you care for an aging individual, you can play a large role in being an encouraging presence in their challenging moments and reminding them they are not alone.

Excessive Anxiety

Most aging adults will experience everyday moments of concern, worry, or uncertainty. But when the anxiety is excessive, it contributes to other issues such as insomnia, loss of concentration, and frequent frustration. Anxiety disorders occur in older adults at almost double the rate that mood disorders like depression do. Older adults tend to be less informed about it because it receives much less focus than depression and dementia. Here are some common symptoms of anxiety:

- Inability to control excessive worrying



- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Irritability
- Being easily startled or scared, and
- Difficulty concentrating or the mind going blank

For more information on anxiety, we encourage you to explore our module dedicated to this topic.

Fear of Falling

One of the most common areas of focus for anxiety among older adults is a fear of falling. More than one out of four older people falls each year, but less than half tell their doctor. “Falling once doubles your chances of falling again.” A fear of falling often results from an experience with a previous fall. The fear can become a lingering source of anxiety that may prevent an older person from independent living and enjoying day to day life activities. Unfortunately, the fear itself can produce an increased risk of falling because people become less active, their bodies become weaker, and they become more likely to be physically unstable. Many older individuals may prefer talking to someone, like a counselor, as opposed to taking medication for anxiety. Encouragement from a primary care doctor to get treatment for anxiety can also go a long way. Aging adults can also help themselves prevent future falls by maintaining an active lifestyle, practicing strength and balance exercises, and getting their eyes checked.

Reflection Point 1

What is a strategy for finding meaningful connections? Choose all of the recommended strategies given within this training.

| Correct | Choice |
|---------|---|
| Yes | Say Yes! |
| Yes | Keep learning new things |
| Yes | Teach others what you know |
| No | Only do things alone |
| Yes | Use the internet to find groups to join |
| Yes | Be open to new friends |
| No | Stay home as much as possible |
| Yes | Adopt or foster a pet |

Trauma and Dementia

A trauma is any event that a person perceives as harmful or threatening and has a long-lasting effect on that person's well-being. These experiences often cause physical and emotional reactions that can last for years after the event, even well into old age. Older adults can and do recover from trauma, even trauma experienced when they were much younger. For some, changes in brain and memory due to dementia can trigger Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - or PTSD - among people who have experienced a traumatic event in their past. This can happen if a person has never showed signs of PTSD before. Let's listen to a story to get an idea of what this may look like.

Cora's Story

My mom, Cora, was diagnosed with a form of dementia a few years ago. It was extremely hard on our entire family. We noticed that she was having a really difficult time remembering stuff that happened recently, even within a day or two of a conversation. This continued to get worse and we finally found out about the dementia. Over the next several months we started noticing that she was becoming more and more afraid of being around people that she knew. The fear was especially bad when we tried to help her with things like getting dressed, bathing, or even

using the bathroom. She got really distraught with any kind of physical touch. There were several times that she yelled things out that gave us the thought that maybe some kind of abuse had happened to her when she was young. It was just heartbreaking to hear and not be able to help my own mom get through it. The dreams were especially difficult as well. She would call out when she was sleeping, yelling for help from someone and crying profusely. The only thing we could do was to try to wake her as gently as possible. My mom was always a very strong woman ... she still is ... so we never really knew that there were things that happened to her in the past that hurt her so badly.

Cora's Symptoms

For Cora, symptoms from her trauma did not appear in her life until the onset of her dementia, creating difficulty for her family in understanding what may be going on with her. It is important to be aware that these conditions can exist at the same time, and the onset of one may bring about or intensify concerns with another.

Mandela Quote

A society that does not value its older people denies its roots and endangers its future. – Nelson Mandela

Use and Abuse

Elder Abuse

Unfortunately, over 15% of people over the age of 60 have experienced some form of elder abuse. Elder abuse can be psychological, physical, financial, sexual, or occur through neglect. Most elder abuse takes place from someone in a position of trust, and older individuals who live in an institution, like a nursing home, indicate higher levels of abuse. Despite the devastating impact of elder abuse, only about 4% of it is ever officially reported. The lack of reporting is likely due to shame, fear, and not wanting to get the abuser (often a family member) in trouble. If someone you know or love has experienced abuse or any form of trauma, remember that healing is possible no matter the person's age. Older adults can and do successfully move toward recovery and experience full, rich lives. For more specific information on this topic, please visit our module on trauma and PTSD.

- Texas Elder Abuse Hotline
(800) 252-5400
- National Eldercare Locator
(800) 677-1116
- National Domestic Violence Hotline (800) 799-7233

Substance Use Disorders

Some older adults turn to substance use to help carry the weight of their burdens. Older individuals are at more risk for developing a substance use disorder due to chronic pain or



physical illness, poor overall health, the presence of a mental health condition, retiring unexpectedly, grief, or feeling socially isolated. Individuals who begin to frequently use alcohol in their older age have often been survivors of elder abuse. Concerningly, some healthcare providers have more dismissive attitudes toward late-life substance use. As a loving family member or friend, it is important to advocate for an individual to receive treatment if a substance use concern is present.

Opioid Use

The opioid epidemic is also now affecting the aging population. Older individuals living with chronic or temporary pain are at risk of becoming addicted to prescription pain medications. The misuse of an opioid often happens without the older person even knowing it initially. Unfortunately, many seniors are given too high of a dose of pain medications to begin with. A high dose coupled with unclear directions from a doctor or a misunderstanding of these directions can lead to a major risk for the older adult. Some seniors may think that they need to take all of the medication that was prescribed in order to not be wasteful, instead of only taking as needed. If a senior adult that you care for is receiving opioid pain medications, you may consider asking their permission to attend their next appointment with them. You can benefit your loved one by asking questions, clarifying instructions, and finding out alternatives for pain management like exercise, massage, yoga, and forms of physical therapy. For more detailed information on treatment of substance use disorders, please refer to the module on this topic.

Reflection Point 2

A common reason for Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) among older adults is their experience with chronic pain. True or False?

| Correct | Choice |
|----------------|---------------|
| Yes | True |
| No | False |

Feedback for Correct Response:

The risk factors for Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) among older adults are:

- Chronic pain
- Physical illness
- Grief
- Social isolation

Feedback for Incorrect Response:

Let's Review

The risk factors for Substance Use Disorders (SUDs) among older adults are:

- Chronic pain
- Physical illness
- Grief
- Social isolation

Underusage of Mental Health Services

Like others with mental health or substance use concerns, many older people do not seek and receive treatment due to negative perceptions of having a behavioral health condition. Society in general still maintains stereotypical attitudes and beliefs that are harmful. Despite the advancements in our understanding of mental health, these perspectives remain alive and well, leaving older individuals to deny their symptoms or be resistant to help. If someone you care for is reluctant to get help, the best approach is to engage in an open, non-judgmental conversation about their condition and available treatments. Sometimes it is helpful if this conversation takes place in the presence of a healthcare professional, like a primary care doctor, who the older person trusts and respects.

Another barrier to quality mental health treatment for older adults is the shortage of specialists. The significant shortage of geriatric psychiatrists who can prescribe medications will only get worse as the aging population continues to increase. Additionally, access barriers, including transportation, insurance, or other financial constraints may lead older adults to be unable to seek treatment they need. For these reasons, the key is being proactive in scheduling appointments with specialists who treat older adults and supporting the individual in accessing proper treatment.

Wellness Strategies

Our mental health and our physical health are intertwined. For seniors, physical health concerns can contribute to the development of conditions like depression and anxiety, and vice versa. So, working on physical health and staying mentally and socially active can have a mutually important benefit for the mind and the body. Here are some ideas for improving mental and physical health.

Physical Wellness Strategies

- Exercise your body!
- Take daily walks
- Go to a senior center
- Do seated exercises

Exercise can have a positive effect on a person's mental health.



This training is funded by Texas Health and Human Services Commission

Group fitness classes can provide a sense of important community.

Mental Wellness Strategies

- Exercise your mind!
- Read diverse content
- Learn new skills
- Play various games

Invite others to learn and play with you.

Emotional Wellness Strategies

- Practice positive emotions!
- Think of daily gratitudes
- Be active socially

Practice being thankful for all the positive things and people in your life.

Spiritual Wellness Strategies

- Pursue spiritual activities!
- Pursue religious activities
- Participate with others

Cultural Wellness Strategies

Explore Culture!

- Visit museums & galleries
- Tour historical sites/programs
- Visit science centers

If you have physical constraints, then explore such places online.

Einstein Quote

Do not grow old, no matter how long you live. Never cease to stand like curious children before the great mystery into which we were born. – Albert Einstein

Summary

Despite feeling like mental and physical capacity might be dwindling with age, it is in fact age, experience, and creativity in older adults that give them limitless potential to continue growing and exploring. You or someone you know may be facing a serious challenge and need help from a medical provider. It might be tempting to read through the symptoms and try to diagnose yourself or someone in your life, but a diagnosis should only be made by a qualified professional. If someone seems to be showing some of these signs and symptoms, encourage that person to speak with a professional that they trust, like a primary care doctor or a

specialist. Taking this step toward help and treatment is critical to ensure the opportunity of the longest and most rewarding life possible. Your loved one, who may be aging with a mental health condition, needs you to be their supporter, their advocate, to help them get the care they need, and a voice of hope and encouragement as they pursue a purposeful life.

www.mentalheathtx.org

Knowledge Check Instructions

It's time to practice what you've learned! This is a quiz with five questions.

Knowledge Check Question 1

If elder abuse were really happening, then it would be reported more frequently. True or False?

| Correct | Choice |
|---------|--------|
| No | True |
| Yes | False |

Feedback for Correct Response:

Good Thinking

Although at least 15% of the adults over 60 have experienced some form of elder abuse (WHO, n.d.), *only 4% of abuse is reported.*

Texas Elder Abuse Hotline
(800) 252-5400

Feedback for Incorrect Response:

Let's Review

Although at least 15% of the adults over 60 have experienced some form of elder abuse (WHO, n.d.), *only 4% of abuse is reported.*

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(800) 252-5400

Knowledge Check Question 2

Which of the following can be symptoms of anxiety among older adults? (*Select all that apply*)

| Correct | Choice |
|---------|------------------------------|
| Yes | Experiencing excessive worry |
| Yes | Experiencing insomnia |
| Yes | Feeling irritable |
| Yes | Struggling to concentrate |

Feedback for Correct Response:

Good Thinking

Experiencing worry, insomnia, irritability, and struggling to concentrate are all symptoms of excessive anxiety among aging adults.

Feedback for Incorrect Response:

Let's Review

Remember that symptoms of excessive anxiety may include experiencing worry, insomnia, irritability, and struggling to concentrate.

Knowledge Check Question 3

When speaking to an older loved one about mental health or substance use concerns, it is recommended to include their:

| Correct | Choice |
|---------|---------------------|
| No | Close friends |
| No | Neighbors |
| Yes | Primary care doctor |
| No | Siblings |

Feedback for Correct Response:

Good Thinking

When speaking to an older loved one about mental health or substance use concerns, it is recommended to include their primary care doctor.

Feedback for Incorrect Response:

Let's Review

When speaking to an older loved one about mental health or substance use concerns, it is recommended to include their primary care doctor.

Knowledge Check Question 4

Volunteering, mentoring, and caring for a pet were strategies for older adults to make meaningful connections.

| Correct | Choice |
|---------|--------|
| Yes | True |
| No | False |

Feedback for Correct Response:

Good Thinking

Recommended strategies for making meaningful connections included:

- Saying Yes to new friends, groups, and activities
- Communicating with friends and family
- Staying physically active
- Giving back by volunteering, teaching, mentoring, and caring for a pet

Feedback for Incorrect Response:

Let's Review

Recommended strategies for making meaningful connections included:

- Saying Yes to new friends, groups, and activities
- Communicating with friends and family
- Staying physically active
- Giving back by volunteering, teaching, mentoring, and caring for a pet



Knowledge Check Question 5

Why is learning a new hobby included as a strategy for mental wellness?

| Correct | Choice |
|---------|-------------------------|
| Yes | It stimulates the brain |
| No | It is inexpensive |
| No | It is a common barrier |
| No | It can be done alone |

Feedback for Correct Response:

Good Thinking.

Learning new hobbies, activities, languages, and games is stimulating for the brain.

Feedback for Incorrect Response:

Let's Review.

Learning new hobbies, activities, languages, and games is stimulating for the brain.