

Senior Scene



What seniors should know about anxiety

Discussions surrounding older adults and health often focus on seniors' physical health. That's understandable, as age-related issues affecting the body can add up over time, making it vital that seniors emphasize a physically active lifestyle that can reduce their risk for an assortment of medical conditions.

But mental health also is an important consideration for older adults, many of whom may be struggling. Anxiety is one mental health issue that affects a significant percentage of older adults. A 2024 study published in the Journal of General and Family Medicine noted that the global prevalence of anxiety symptoms among older adults is 28 percent. That means nearly one in three older adults is experiencing symptoms of anxiety. With so many seniors potentially confronting anxiety, it can be helpful to older adults and their loved ones to learn about the condition, its causes and its signs and symptoms.

Defining anxiety The National Council on Aging notes that anxiety is a natural response to many life stressors. But when anxious feelings overwhelm an individual and make daily life more difficult, a person may be experiencing an anxiety disorder. According to the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry (AAGP), anxiety disorders cause feelings of fear, worry, apprehension, or dread.

What distinguishes anxiety from an anxiety disorder?

The American Psychiatric Association notes occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. But occasional anxiety comes and goes rather quickly, whereas an anxiety disorder is marked by a more persistent level of anxiety that's harder to control. In addition, an anxiety disorder can affect how people interact with others, how they work, and even their overall well-being.

Are there different types of anxiety?

Yes. The AAGP notes that anxiety may be a specific phobia in which a person harbors an intense and irrational fear of a place, thing or event. Social anxiety is another type of disorder that occurs when an individual feels overwhelmingly anxious and self-conscious in the typical social situations people encounter each day. Generalized anxiety disorder is marked by constant worry even when there is little or nothing to cause concern. These are just some of the various types of anxiety.

What causes an anxiety disorder?

The AAGP notes a number of factors can contribute to an anxiety disorder, including:

- Extreme stress or trauma
- Bereavement and complicated or chronic grief, which may be of particular concern for older adults dealing with the death of a spouse or a longtime friend

- Consumption of alcohol, caffeine or drugs, including prescription or over-the-counter medication
- A separate medical condition or illness
- Neurodegenerative disorders, such as dementia

How do I know if I or a loved one is experiencing an anxiety disorder?

Seniors are urged to speak to a health care professional if they feel they are over-

whelmed by anxiety. Family members also can learn to look for signs of anxiety disorder, which the AAGP notes include:

- Excessive worry or fear
- Refusing to engage in routine activities or being overly preoccupied with routine
- Avoiding social situations
- Excessive concern about safety
- Physical symptoms such as a racing

heart, shallow breathing, trembling, nausea, and/or sweating

- Difficulty sleeping or poor sleep
- Muscle tension, feeling weak and shaky
- Hoarding, which the Cleveland Clinic notes is a distinct mental health condition but also a sign of an underlying anxiety disorder
- Depression
- Self-medication with alcohol or

other central nervous system depressants, including benzodiazepines and barbiturates

There are many ways to treat anxiety disorders in older adults, so seniors should not hesitate to open a dialogue with a health care professional if they feel they are dealing with excessive anxiety. More information can be found at aagponline.org.

Practices that can benefit seniors' mental health

Making an effort to maintain and safeguard mental health is a key component of a healthy lifestyle, and that's as true for seniors as it is for children, young adults and men and women in middle age. Seniors can embrace a number of practices and habits to safeguard their mental health well into their golden years.

- Spend more time with family. Spending time with family members can be especially beneficial for adults 70 and older. According to a 2023 study published in the Journal of Gerontology: Series B, adults without family ties had worse mental health and were less likely to engage socially than older adults who were close to their family. The researchers behind the study noted those bene-

fits are not affected by distance, as even the older adults who lived far away from their family members but maintained strong social ties to their families enjoyed higher levels of mental health and social participation than seniors with no such connections.

- Exercise regularly. Routine exercise also can have a profound impact on seniors' mental health. The Anxiety & Depression Association of America reports that evidence supports the notion that exercise can shift attitude, mindset and mood in a positive way. Another study found that adults who participated in a regular physical activity program experienced reduced rates of long-term and acute depression.

- Incorporate travel into your golden

years. Working professionals have long expressed an intention to travel more during retirement, and doing so may have an even bigger impact than seniors realize. According to a joint report from the Global Coalition on Aging and the Transamerica Institute® released in 2025, regular travel has been shown to lower Alzheimer's risk by up to 47 percent, a benefit researchers link to culturally enriching activities like visiting museums and exploring historical landmarks. The same report also notes that travel helps to address loneliness and social isolation, which are mental health issues that the senior population is especially

vulnerable to, particularly during retirement.

- Volunteer. The Mayo Clinic Health System notes that volunteering can boost mental health in a number of ways. Volunteering has been found to reduce stress and increase positive, relaxed feelings. The Mayo Clinic also notes that volunteering leads to lower rates of anxiety and depression, particularly among adults 65 and older.

Mental health is part of a healthy lifestyle. Seniors can look to various practices to protect their mental health and reduce their risk for conditions such as social isolation, loneliness and depression that affect a great number of older adults.



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