




## Suicide prevention for older adults

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**Being in good mental health doesn't mean that you'll never feel sad, lonely or "down." But when these feelings disrupt your life or go on too long, there may be a bigger problem.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Good mental health is ageless. Available at: [SAMHSA.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov). Accessed May 2023

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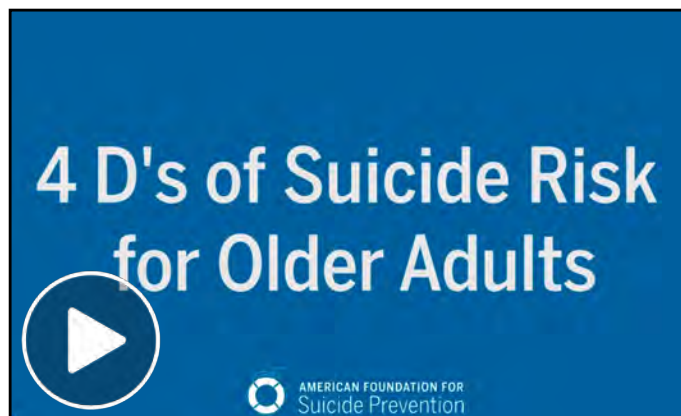


# Facts about older adults and suicide<sup>2,3</sup>

Did you know that suicide ranks as the 11th leading cause of death in the U.S.? What's even more surprising is that although older adults make up just 12 percent of the population, they account for 18 percent of suicides. Additionally, older adults are less likely to survive a suicide attempt.

One reason for this is that older adults tend to plan their suicide attempts more carefully, and sadly, they're also more likely to use highly lethal methods. That's a striking contrast to the younger generation; where 1 in 200 youths will die by suicide after an attempt. Among older adults, it's a devastating 1 in 4.

Men aged 65 and older face the highest overall rate of suicide. These facts highlight the need for better suicide prevention support, especially among our older adult population.



## The four Ds of suicide risk in older adults



## What is suicidal ideation?



<sup>2</sup> [Facts about suicide](#). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Available at: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov). Accessed May 2023.

<sup>3</sup> [Understanding and preventing suicide in older adults](#). National Council on Aging. Available at: [ncoa.org](https://www.ncoa.org). Accessed May 2023.



### Who is at risk?

Risk factors are characteristics or conditions that may increase the chance a person may try to end their life. These include:

- Mental health conditions
- Prior suicide attempts or family history
- Marked feelings of hopelessness
- Pain and declining role function (e.g., loss of independence or sense of purpose)
- Prolonged stress, harassment or bullying
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Family discord or losses (e.g., recent death of a loved one)
- Inflexible personality or marked difficulty adapting to change
- Access to lethal means (e.g., firearms)
- Substance use problems
- Traumatic brain injury
- Medical conditions that limit functioning or life expectancy

Aging can also present transitions that are difficult to cope with. Approximately 80 percent of older adults live with a chronic disease such as arthritis, diabetes or high blood pressure — and 77 percent have at least two, according to The National Council on Aging.<sup>4</sup> Certain health conditions are more prone to add to an older adult's suicide risk, including:<sup>5</sup>

- Chronic diseases such as kidney disease, diabetes, lung disease, cancer and heart disease
- Dialysis treatment
- Macular degeneration and/or vision loss
- Mobility issues
- Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- Insomnia
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Stroke
- Congestive heart failure

<sup>4</sup> [Senior citizens struggle with suicide as loneliness and isolation set in.](#) Available at: npr.org. Accessed July 2023

<sup>5</sup> [Major physical health conditions and risk of suicide.](#) Available at: ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. Accessed June 2023.



## What are the signs?

It's important to know the signs. Most people who take their lives present warning signs, either through what they do or what they say. Beyond expressing suicidal intent, certain behaviors can indicate an older adult is thinking about self-harm. These include but are not limited to:

- 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
- Looking for a way to end their lives, such as searching online for methods
- Fatigue or sleeping too much or too little
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- Aggression
- Decreased appetite
- Prolonged bereavement in men

## What can I do?

Three simple tips to remember are Acknowledge, Care and Take Action (ACT).

**Contact the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline if you are experiencing mental health-related distress or are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support. 988 is confidential, free and available 24/7/365.**

- Call or text **988**
- Chat at **988lifeline.org**
- Call **911** in an emergency or go to a hospital
- Talk to a mental health provider
- Call a friend or family member

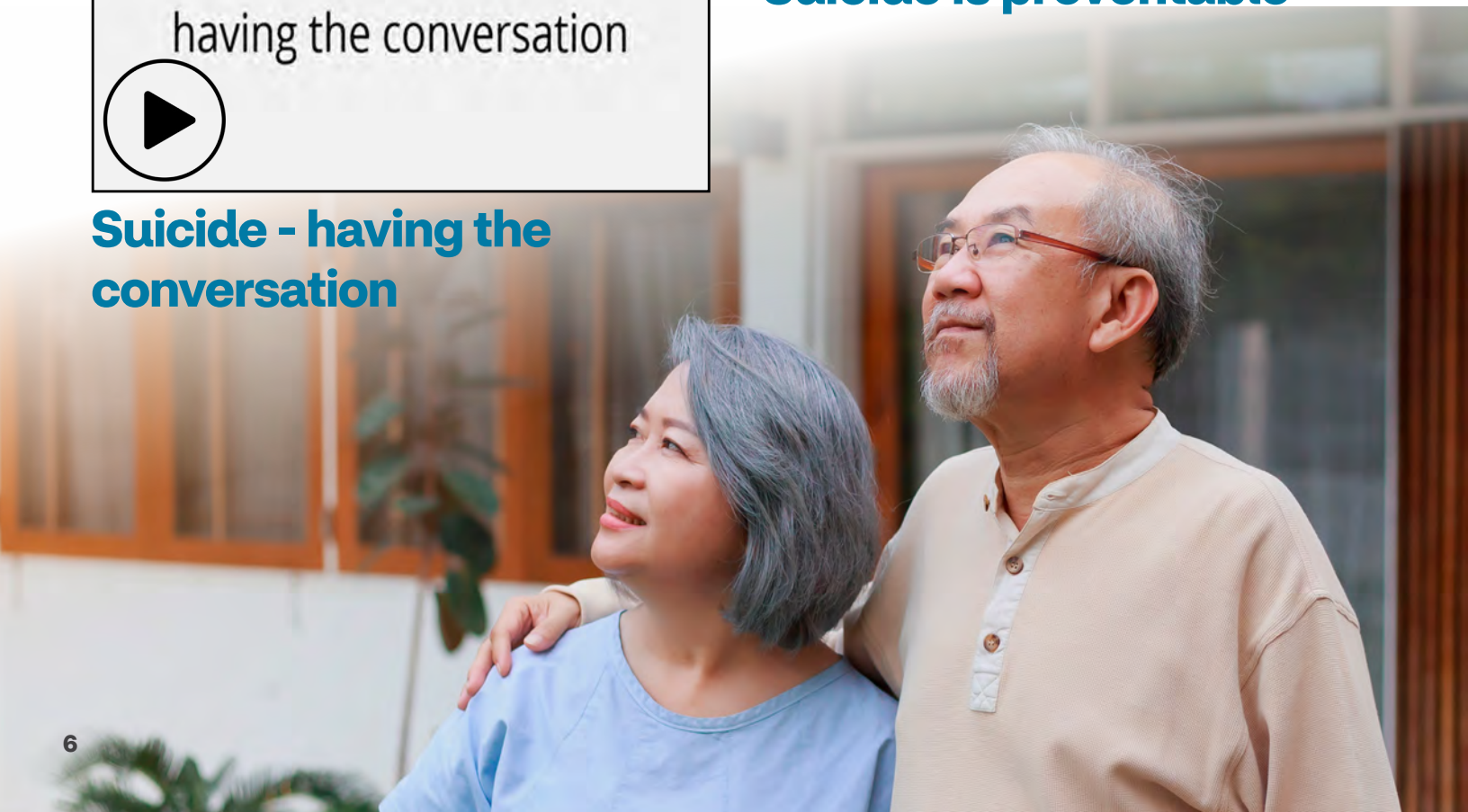


It is important to remember **Suicide is preventable**

**Let's Talk:**  
Suicide -  
having the conversation



## Suicide - having the conversation





# How to seek help

## Access to mental health care

- It can be hard to change habits and thoughts on your own. And social situations can often be scary. Feelings of loneliness can increase during certain stages of life. If you're feeling lonely, you may also feel depressed or anxious. Consider seeing a counselor or other mental health professional.
- Ask your employer about EAP services. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) often include resources on mental health, substance misuse and stress management. Services typically include a number of counseling sessions with no out-of-pocket cost. Mental health and substance misuse treatment is often covered by health plans, including Medicare and Medicaid. Contact your health plan for information about benefits and providers.
- When looking for a counselor, it might be difficult to know where to start. It may be helpful to ask someone you trust for a referral. It's important to recognize your needs may differ, so a good match for them may not be a good match for you. Your doctor might also have suggestions.

Here are other ideas:

- Call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at **1-800- 273-TALK (8255)** or visit **988lifeline.org** and click "get help." Lifeline crisis workers know their local communities and may be able to refer you to a counselor or support group in your area. Crisis workers are also available to talk with you about your suicidal thoughts while you're finding long-term sources of support.
- Check out the SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator online at **findtreatment.samhsa.gov** or call them at **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**.
- In many communities, you can reach an information and referral hotline by dialing three simple digits: **2-1-1**. If dialing **2-1-1** doesn't work for you, check out **211.org** for the seven-digit number of your local information and referral hotline.<sup>6</sup>
- Find resources for suicide prevention centered on supporting **diverse** and **LGBTQ+** communities.

<sup>6</sup>A journey toward health and hope. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Available at [Samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov). Accessed June 2023





## Being proactive about your mental health

- **Emotional wellness** is important. Learning simple tips to promote a greater sense of well-being can make a difference.
- **Physical and mental health** are connected. Taking care of both helps build resilience for managing stress.
- Learning how to identify **warning signs** early can help ensure appropriate treatment or support is identified. This Change Direction video: **R U Withdrawn?** can help you identify the signs of isolation and benefits of reaching out.

## Connecting to family and community supports

- Social connection is vital not only to our individual physical, mental and emotional health, but also to the health and well-being of our communities.<sup>7</sup>
- It might seem overwhelming to think about ways to be social or make meaningful connections. Taking small steps can make a big difference. Here are some ideas to think about:<sup>8</sup>
  - **Try volunteering.** Look for organizations that interest you and have needs you can help with. For example, animal shelters often need people to walk dogs or play with cats. And local food banks may need people to organize shelves or help community members find what they need.
  - **Consider a meet-up group.** Many cities have meet-up groups organized around activities, interests or hobbies. You may find groups for hikers, caregivers, people who enjoy board

games or for those who just like drinking coffee. Websites like **meetup.com** can help you find groups near you.

- **Think about getting a pet.** if you can care for one, a pet can be an excellent companion. The type of pet you choose is up to you. Your local animal shelter can help you find a pet that fits your lifestyle.
- **Join or start a group like a book or sewing club.** Get together with peers in your community on a regular basis. Listen to this **Think Tank podcast** to learn about the Lunch Bunch and how they build connections as older adults.
- A great place to start for financial assistance, food pantries, medical care and other free or reduced-cost resources is **Findhelp.org**. Type in your zip code and explore resources near you or a loved one.
- Review the **social wellness checklist** to find tips for connecting with others.
- Learn **how you can help older adults stay connected** with a few simple ideas, including video calling or spending time with them outdoors.
- Consider taking a **Mental Health First Aid** course to learn more ways to support others with mental health and substance use issues.
- Learn more about **how to support someone with suicidal thoughts** from a mental health provider.

<sup>7</sup>Our epidemic on loneliness and isolation. The U.S. Public Health Service. Available at: hhs.gov. Accessed May 2023

<sup>8</sup>Simple ways to connect with others and reduce loneliness. Healthwise. Available at: Columbiadoctors.gov Accessed July 2023







## Good problem-solving and coping skills

- Shift negative thinking. When you feel lonely, it's common to have negative thoughts and emotions. But if negative thinking becomes a pattern, you may start to believe that the positive changes you are looking for aren't possible. If you can learn to catch negative thinking, you can learn to shift it.<sup>8</sup>
- Life skills are a key protective factor for suicide and include critical thinking, stress management, conflict resolution, problem-solving and coping skills. Activities that enhance these skills can help people as they face new challenges such as economic stress, divorce, physical illness and aging.<sup>9</sup>
- **Good mental health is ageless.** Review tips that can help you keep your mind and body well.
- Practice regulating your attention with **mindfulness**, which is the observation of thoughts, emotions and body states.
- Consistent **physical activity** can benefit your overall health by improving mood, increasing self-confidence and reducing stress.
- It's never too early to develop ways to manage common **senior health** topics like grief, advanced directives and Alzheimer's.
- **A journey toward health and hope** is a useful handbook for recovery after a suicide attempt.
- Other resources: **After an attempt self-guide** and **After an attempt family guide** can help you care for yourself or a loved one following a suicide attempt.

## Limited access to lethal means

- If someone in the home is feeling suicidal, has recently attempted suicide or is experiencing a crisis, it is safest to remove lethal means from the household entirely until the situation improves. For example:<sup>10</sup>
  - Store firearms with law enforcement (if allowed) or lock up firearms and put the key in a safe deposit box or give the key to a friend until the crisis has passed.
  - Ask a family member to store medications safely and dispense safe quantities as necessary.

<sup>8</sup> [Simple ways to connect with others and reduce loneliness](#). Healthwise. Available at: hhs.gov. Accessed July 2023

<sup>9</sup> [Enhance life skills and resilience](#). Suicide Prevention Resource Center. Available at: sprc.org. Accessed July 2023

<sup>10</sup> [Effective-prevention](#). Suicide Prevention Resource Center. Available at: sprc.org. Accessed June 2023



## Cultural and religious beliefs that encourage connecting and help-seeking discourage suicidal behavior and create a strong sense of purpose or self-esteem

- Many people find a sense of purpose or strength through their faith or spirituality.
  - Find a religious organization: local church / mosque / temple / assembly hall you can connect with.
  - Some organizations have volunteers who can provide transportation to services and/or visits to homebound members.
- Volunteering improves relationships between people and communities. There are online or in-person opportunities for a wide variety of interests and abilities. Click on each image below to check out a few opportunities:



- For LGBTQ+ organizations check out **Services & Advocacy for LGBT Elders (SAGE)** and **glaad.org**.
- Check out the **“What is cultural humility?”** video to learn how this mindset can help us discourage suicidal behavior by promoting equity and inclusion in our communities.
- Addressing stigma connected to **men and mental health** allows us to remove **cultural barriers** and **encourage men to speak up and get care for their emotional well-being**.





## Terms you should know

**Abuse:** cruel, violent or demeaning treatment towards another person. The term typically suggests physical mistreatment but also includes sexual and emotional mistreatment.

**Addiction:** physical or emotional dependence on the use of alcohol or other drugs. Often used interchangeably with substance abuse and sometimes refers to sexual, internet and gambling addictions.

**Anxiety:** feelings of tension, worried thoughts or dread that may cause sweating, increased heart rate or blood pressure.

**Belonging:** feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places and experiences.

**Depression:** mood disorder that can cause people to feel constantly sad and lose interest in things that used to give them pleasure. Sometimes triggered by stressful events in a person's life.

**Loneliness:** feeling disconnected or isolated; as if you do not have close or meaningful relationships.

**Mental health:** individuals' ability to feel, think and act in ways that allow them to enjoy life and deal with the challenges they face.

**Prevention:** plan based on the best available evidence to help communities prevent suicide. Focuses on lowering the risk of suicide and reducing the long-term effects of suicidal behavior for individuals, families and communities.

**Psychiatrist:** medical provider who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions.

**Risk factors:** conditions that increase suicide risk.

**Safety plan:** list of coping strategies and supports. Individuals can use these strategies before or during a suicidal crisis.

**Self-injury** or **self-harm:** deliberate injuring or harming of one's body. Can be motivated by emotional distress. It may or may not result in death. People who injure themselves may or may not have a clear intent to die.

**The terms "Seniors" or "older adults":** typically refer to individuals over the age of 65.

**Social isolation:** lack of or few social relationships or connections.

**Stigma:** negative and often unfair beliefs about something or someone. It often causes shame. Stigma around mental health is often based on misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about mental health conditions.

**Suicide:** self-inflicted death involving at least a partial desire to die. It sometimes occurs without any psychiatric disorder, such as extreme or prolonged bereavement or declining health.

**Therapist:** person trained to treat mental or physical health conditions typically through counseling. In the mental health field, therapists can be called psychotherapists.

**Trauma:** any distressing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, confusion or other disruptive feelings.





# Suicide awareness national resources

## 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Call or text **988** to connect with free, confidential support 24/7. Or visit the [Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) website for information and resources.

## American Association of Suicidology

Visit the [American Association of Suicidology](#) website or call **1-888-9-PREVENT** for information on current research, prevention, ways to help a person having suicidal thoughts and surviving suicide. A list of crisis centers is also included.

## American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Visit the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) website or call **1-888-333-AFSP (2377)** for research, education and current statistics on suicide. The website offers links to other suicide prevention and mental health sites.

## Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Visit the CDC's [Suicide Prevention](#) page for links to suicide statistics, prevention and safety information. Or call **1-770-488-4362**.

## Crisis Text Line

Text **HOME** to **741741** to chat with a crisis counselor by text message from anywhere in the U.S. 24/7.

## Mental Health First Aid

Similar to CPR and First Aid training, Mental Health First Aid helps people identify, understand and respond to mental health issues. You can find a local training at the [Mental Health First Aid](#) website.

## National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

NAMI's helpline provides support, information and referrals. They can help people with mental health conditions, family and friends, providers and the public.

**Connect online** and by phone at **1-800-950-6264** or text "**Helpline**" to **62640**.

## National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Visit the [NIMH](#) website to find information about mental health issues and suicide prevention.

## National Library of Medicine

Visit the [National Library of Medicine](#) website and search "suicide" for suicide prevention information and articles.

## Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE)

The [SAVE](#) website provides suicide education, facts and statistics on suicide and depression. It links to information on warning signs of suicide and the role a friend or family member can play in helping a person having suicidal thoughts.

## Veterans Crisis Line

Veterans, service members, National Guard and Reserve members and the people who support them can connect 24/7 for crisis support. Visit the [Veterans Crisis Line](#) website to learn more. For immediate support, call **988** and then press 1, or text **838255**.





# Additional mental health and wellness resources for older adults

## AARP Foundation

**Connect2affect** has many resources for reducing loneliness and social isolation among older adults. It includes a local assistance directory for virtual and in-person social activities, ways to get support, wellness opportunities and resources for health and mental health needs. It's tailored by location and personal factors and preferences. The website also includes articles, videos and webinars related to social isolation and loneliness in older adults as well as an interactive assessment.

## Meals on Wheels

Visit the **Meals on Wheels America** website to help locate information on delivering nutrition and social connection to seniors.

## National Council on Aging

Visit the **National Council on Aging** website or call **1-202-479-1200** for information and resources for older Americans and their loved ones.

## Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration

Visit the **Samhsa** website for information and resources on mental health and substance abuse. Call **1-877- 726-4727** for additional information.

## US Aging

Promotes the health, security and well-being of older adults. Local agencies develop and deliver a variety of programs and services. You can find local resources through **usaging.org**.

## United Way

Helps individuals gain access to programs that focus on the building blocks of a happy and healthy life — education, financial stability and health. Search for local resources across the U.S. and Canada by zip code 24/7 at **United Way** or call **2-1-1**.

## U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Find caregiver resources, information about healthy aging, managing health conditions, resources near you to support older adults and their caregivers. See what's available in your state at the **HHS** website.

## U.S. Pain Foundation

Visit the **U.S. Pain Foundation** to connect to resources, information and peer support to empower people to live fulfilling lives while managing chronic pain. Includes links to guided meditations. Call **1-800-910-2462** or email **Contact@USPainFoundation.org**.



**We can all do something about suicide. Learn about it, reach out and offer support.**



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