

## Common Stressors for Aging Adults

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Mental health is not easy to define, but aging successfully should mean a person has good mental health. This does not mean older adults will never experience any problems or diseases, but that symptoms will be treated and controlled. Mental health problems should not interfere with leading a rewarding life.

For many older people, later life offers enjoyable opportunities for travel, hobbies, volunteering and having more time to spend with family and friends and do favorite activities. But even older adults whose lives are filled with such rewards may experience periods of high stress. Moving to a new location, dealing with health problems, or coping with the death of a friend or spouse can be very difficult. Later life can be a time of persistent stress for those who are frail and isolated. Older persons may experience loss of mobility, financial insecurity, physical dependence and loss of relationships with relatives and friends.

These challenges can lead to serious physical and mental health problems. If someone experiences a great deal of stress, has difficulty adapting to change in circumstances, does not have supportive relationships, has difficulty relying on others, or has a negative outlook on life, the individual is at greater risk.

### Be Aware of Major Stressors

Some major stressors include loneliness, isolation, loss of purpose and independence, and changes in health and physical ability. In addition, those caring for others face extreme stress, tiredness and loneliness.

#### *Loneliness and isolation*

- loss of a spouse through death or divorce
- loss of family members due to death, relocation, divorce, conflict
- loss of friends
- loss of a pet
- lack of communication with loved ones

#### *Loss of purpose*

- changes due to retirement
- loss of being needed
- loss of position in community

#### *Loss of independence*

- loss of ability to drive safely

- lack of transportation services
- distance from family and friends
- decreased financial independence
- increased health care costs

#### *Changes in health*

- deterioration in health
- increased dependence on others
- diagnosis of a chronic disease

#### *Decreased physical ability*

- loss of ability to live alone
- loss of energy
- loss of control over daily routine
- possible inability to do favorite things
- loss of ability to drive safely

#### *Demands of caregiving*

- difficulty caring for ill spouse or partner
- loss of freedom for self and dreams
- feeling overwhelmed with responsibility

### Stress Symptoms

- feeling tired
- sleeplessness
- irritability
- unnecessary worrying
- headaches and other pains
- negative feelings or attitude
- feeling out of control
- feeling overwhelmed
- poor concentration
- frequent crying
- constipation or diarrhea
- shortness of breath

If you or an older adult you know is experiencing one or more of these stressors or has any of these symptoms, it will be helpful to learn stress management techniques or seek assistance.

Try some of the following stress reduction techniques.

- relax your body
- inhale slowly and deeply
- meditate on a single focus
- be quiet, turn off the TV
- close your eyes

- picture a peaceful place or word
- visualize a “mental vacation”
- do some of your favorite things
- try humor
- exercise often
- spend time with people you care about and who care about you
- consider professional counseling

### **Did You Know?**

- Mental health problems are common.
- One in four people will have a mental health problem sometime in his or her life.

### **If You or Someone You Know Needs Help, Please Call:**

National Mental Health Association (NMHA),  
**1-800-969-NMHA;**

National Association for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Helpline,  
**1-800-950-6264;**

The Center for Mental Health Services Information Line,  
**1-800-780-CMHS;** or Nebraska Mental Health,  
**(402) 479-5126;**

Nebraska Mental Health Consumer Help Line,  
**1-800-836-7660;**

Nebraska State Department of Aging, **(402) 471-4617;**  
or your local mental health office or community services.

### **References**

A Mental Health Guide for Older Kansans and Their Families, 2000.

Nebraska Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Gambling Services, 2000.

Panhandle Mental Health Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

Panhandle Community Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

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