

Managing Anxiety in Older Adults

Why worry about worrying?

- Anxiety is associated with an increased risk of stroke, cardiovascular events, and chronic physical illness. ^{1,2}
- Older adults with Alzheimer's and anxiety are prone to worsening decline in their thinking and behaviors that can be difficult for caregivers to manage. ¹
- Research suggests that anxiety may contribute to cognitive decline in seniors and vice versa. ¹
- Anxiety is associated with increased symptoms of depression. ³
- Seniors with anxiety and dementia are more likely to be placed in a Skilled Nursing Facility. ¹

How can I tell if my loved one is struggling with anxiety?

- **Do your loved one's worries seem appropriate to the situation? Or do they seem excessive?** If an older adult says that they aren't getting out of the house because they are afraid of a fall, consider if they have actually had a fall or are at significant risk. If they are limiting their activity because they *worry* about falling, then they may actually lose their strength and be at risk of developing medical issues like heart disease because they are not moving around enough. ³
- **Is anxiety getting in the way of their day-to-day lives?** Medical providers may be less prone to ask their older patients this because they wrongly assume older adults do not have a regular schedule and activities that they enjoy. ⁴ Your understanding of your loved one's normal routine will help you notice key changes and the ways in which anxiety may be impacting their ability to function.
- **Are they able to control their worries?** If they are not receptive to soothing or are unable to calm themselves, that may indicate the need for professional assistance in managing their anxiety.
- **Have you noticed changes to their physical functioning, cognition, or behavior?** Adults struggling with anxiety can experience sleep disturbances, challenges concentrating, irritability, physical tension, and restlessness. ⁵ Consider if these symptoms seem out-of-the-blue, in which case they are more likely to be caused by a medical issue. If the symptoms are chronic, they are more likely to be caused by traditional anxiety. ¹ Changes to their medication regimen may also cause symptoms. If your loved one has received a medical work-up and there is not an underlying cause, anxiety may be the culprit.
- **Ask.** Studies have shown older adults may be hesitant to discuss their psychological health. ³ It may be easier for them to let you know what's going on if you gently ask how they are feeling.

¹ Beaudreau, S. A., & O'Hara, R. (2008). Late-life anxiety and cognitive impairment: A review. *American Association of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 16(10), 790-803.

² Tully, P. J., Cosh, S. M., & Baune, B. T. (2013). A review of the affects of worry and generalized anxiety disorder upon cardiovascular health and coronary heart disease. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 18(6), 627-644. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2012.749355>

³ Kogan, J. N., Edelstein, B. A., & McKee, D. R. (2000) Assessment of anxiety in older adults: Current status. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 14, 109-132. Retrieved from Pergamon.

⁴ Bryant, C. (201). Anxiety and depression in old age: Challenges in recognition and diagnosis. *International Psychogeriatric*, 22, 511-513. doi:10.1017/S1041610209991785

What do I do?

- **Communicate your observations.** Talk to your relative about the changes in their thoughts and behaviors that you have observed. Remind them that it is not typical or enjoyable to be experiencing the extent of worry that they are, and that with the appropriate treatment they can have better health outcomes and a better quality of life. If you anticipate that they will feel uncomfortable having these discussions, consult with your Senior Care Advisor for strategies and tools to ease the conversation.
- **Think of anxiety as an illness.** Very understandably, many older adults, their families, and sometimes even their physicians focus on seeking treatment for the illnesses that seem more major, like dementia or cardiovascular disease. Since anxiety can have major impacts on older adults' cognitive function and physical health, seek treatment for anxiety right alongside other conditions. The result will likely be improved health all around.
- **Encourage your loved one to report symptoms to their doctor.** Empower them to take action with their healthcare. If they would prefer your assistance, offer to attend an appointment with them or call the doctor together. If they decline your assistance, you always have the option to communicate your concerns to their doctor; however, you will be unable to receive details about their health without your loved one's permission.
- **Advocate for access to treatment.** A Primary Care Physician (PCP) may not know the best way to manage anxiety. Request a referral to a geriatric psychiatrist or nurse practitioner who can advise on appropriate medications and treatment. Seek a therapist understanding of the unique experience of older adults. One study even indicated that older adults with cognitive impairments still benefited from specially tailored therapeutic sessions.⁶
- **Help your loved one connect to social supports.** One study indicated that loneliness had a strong association with anxiety disorders.⁷ See if you can encourage outings with family and friends, day activities, and phone calls to keep your loved one socially engaged.

For further questions about how to assist an older adult in accessing support, reach out to Senior Care Planning at (855) 781.1303 ext. 3 or careplanning@care.com. Our team is comprised of Masters-level social workers who can offer guidance tailored to you and your family's needs.

⁵American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing

⁶Andreescu, C., & Varon, D. (2015). New research on anxiety disorders in the elderly and an update on evidence-based treatments. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 17, 1-7. DOI 10.1007/s11920-015-0595-8

⁷Beekman, A. T. F., Bremmer, M. A., Deeg, D. J. H., Van Balkom, M., Smit, J. H., De Beurs, E., Van Dyck, R., & Van Tilburg, W. (199). Anxiety disorders in later life: A report from the longitudinal aging study Amsterdam. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 13, 717-726. Retrieved from wileyonlinelibrary.com