

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

What Are We Missing? Suicide Risk in Older Adults

In the past few years there has been plenty of discussion about the fact that the older adult population is growing. Currently adults aged 60 and over is double what it was in 1980 and by 2056 they will outnumber those aged 18 and under. This will be the first time in history this will happen. This growing population deserves special attention and considerations as they continue to age.

One of the pressing issues that requires attention is the suicide rate amongst the elderly, as they represent a disproportionately large number of suicides in the United States. Currently 17% of suicides are accounted for by people 65 and over, while this population only makes up 12% of the population. This disproportionate number of older adults committing suicide can be accounted for by a number of possible reasons:

- Increased feelings of hopelessness and depression
- Decrease in social connection and support network
- Increased experience of grief and major life changes
- Increased likelihood to be on medications for which depression is a common side effect
- Decrease in physical resilience to overcome a suicide attempt

While all of these are possible risk factors for suicide, not all older adults struggle with these same experiences or challenges. Even when some are experiencing these issues they are often not likely to reach out for help or outwardly show signs of depression. Instead it is necessary for caregivers and loved ones to be aware of warning signs that may indicate concerns with depression as well as other life circumstances that may increase these feelings.

More often than not experiencing depression is not the sole risk for suicide. Other life events in combination with an underlying struggle with depression creates the environment for which suicidal thoughts can become most challenging.

For loved ones this is most important to make note of, as when an elderly family member is experiencing the loss of friends or family or other major life changes they should be provided with greater support. This increased support and added attention can provide the care needed to help someone through the most challenging times.

In this process it is important to be aware of signs that may indicate an older adult may need some further assistance:

- Changes in Sleep
    - Any significant change whether it be sleeping more or less.
- Changes in appetite
    - Increase or decrease in appetite as well as hydration
- Changes in self care habits
    - Taking medication inappropriately, not showering or keeping up with daily care activities.
- Preoccupation with death
    - Frequently commenting about death, dying, or not being around much longer

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- Preparation for death
    - Getting all affairs in order, making changes to will, etc when this was not a previous concern

Some of these signs can be relatively normal changes due to other issues going on, but it is nonetheless important to take this opportunity to talk with a loved one about their experience. Keeping the conversation open and talking with them will make it easier for you and for them as you continue to help monitor their care and health as they grow older.

Having these conversations and taking on this caregiver role can be difficult and quite stressful. While you pay attention to your loved one it's also important to pay attention to yourself. Whether you are stressed out by your own experience, anxious about having a conversation with your loved one, or angry that a loved one has contemplated suicide, your EAP is here to help you through your own challenges. Give them a call today and a counselor will be available to assist you.