



Having the conversation with older people about anxiety and depression

If you're concerned about an older person being anxious or depressed, or just not coping, then it is important to take the first step. Begin a conversation; your support and concern may make all the difference.

It can be hard to talk to an older person about their mental health sometimes, particularly if it is someone that you have always looked up to and relied upon. They may have supported you through many difficult times but now it might be time to return the favour. Be patient and compassionate as you talk openly with them about what is going on and why you are worried about them.

It's sometimes hard to talk

Talking about thoughts and feelings can be difficult for anyone. For older people, their reluctance to talk is often related to a range of fears or past experiences that leave them feeling:

- ashamed to ask for help
- uncomfortable talking about their feelings
- fearful that they will become a burden on their families
- misunderstood by younger generations
- uninformed and without the relevant knowledge
- fearful they will be treated differently by their family if they admit to not coping well

- worried what will happen if they admit to having mental health problems because of how mental health issues were treated in the past.

Getting ready to talk

Think about how you can make your conversation as normal and natural as possible.

- Choose the right time and place to talk, and think carefully about who will be involved. Conversations are best in a relaxed environment with people that they trust and relate to.
- Look for opportunities to talk. It might not be an 'organised' conversation, instead it might happen while you walk, have a coffee or go on an outing.
- Make sure the person's privacy is respected.
- Think about when the person might be most receptive to your conversation. If they are tired, busy or distracted by other issues then they may not respond to the conversation as you had hoped.
- Think about what has worked well when you have had to have tricky conversations in the past.
- Listen to your own thoughts and feelings about the situation. If you find yourself getting frustrated or annoyed, think about ending the conversation for now.

"To talk to them and ask them if they're okay, it could be that you are the only person."

- Victoria

Raising the issue

- Let the older person know that you care about them and that you have noticed changes in them lately. Provide examples if you can.
- As you ask questions, reassure them that you are there to help. You don't want to interfere; rather, you want to better understand what is happening and how you can support them.
- Try to understand their reaction to your concerns.
 - If they are reluctant to talk try to understand why and help them to feel at ease.
 - If they feel overwhelmed reassure them that together you can find a way through.
 - Appreciate what they share with you, no matter how small.
 - If they are emotional sit with them, offer a tissue, and let them know that crying is OK.

Things you could say

- "You seem more tired than usual and just not your usual happy self – have you noticed anything?"
- "You don't seem your normal self lately – are you OK?"
- "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I care for you, I'm worried about you, I want us to work this through, I'm not sure what it is but I think there might be something that we can do together."

- David

Try to understand

To understand you need to listen, but a good listener is more than just someone who hears the story. It's about approaching their story with curiosity and concern, and trying not to jump in to offer solutions. Sometimes just sitting quietly also gives them time to work out how to express how they feel.

- Ask questions to learn more about how they feel, when they feel this way, and what might help the feelings to improve.
- Check with the person that you have properly understood what they have said.
- Acknowledge that you may see mental health issues very differently from the older person you are worried about. Consider if it would be helpful to explain how attitudes have changed towards mental health issues.
- Use words that have meaning to them and focus on the changes you have noticed rather than trying to say that they "have a problem" or that they "have depression".
- Understand that feeling flat, irritable and grumpy are not normal parts of ageing.

Be supportive

Supporting someone you care about can take many emotional and practical forms. It is about finding the balance and understanding that what they need will change over time.

Ask them how you can help

Offers of help should be provided with care and respect; encourage their independence and decision making while also gently nudging them to keep doing the things they enjoy.

- Don't underestimate the value of your company, support and a listening ear.



- Ask how they would like you to help. They might want help around the home or help to go on more social outings or activities. Be sensitive about how you approach this as some older people are very proud of their independence.
- Value their experience and wisdom. Most older people have lived through times of significant stress, grief or perhaps war. This experience will have helped to shape their thinking, style of coping and ability to solve problems. Call on their wisdom when searching for solutions as they may have ideas that you have not yet considered.
- Find a balance between doing things to help the person while encouraging them to be independent, showing you care but not being over-involved, and giving the person your time and having time for yourself.

Things you could say

- "How about I help you with your shopping each week? If you feel up to it we can go together, but if not I can just get it done for you."
- "How can I help? Is there something that you think would really make things better for you?"
- "I want to help but I don't want to interfere so tell me when I am getting in the way."
- "You have always helped me; I think it is time that I helped you out. Come on... what can I do? Give me a job to do."

Encourage them to talk

The older person may or may not be ready to get help but encourage them to talk openly with you, or other family members, about how they feel and what they might find helpful from others.

- If the older person is reluctant to talk try to understand why and be patient.
- Talking about anxiety and depression usually doesn't happen in just one conversation so look at this as the starting point.
- If talking about feelings is difficult for the older person, change the focus a little. Focus on how things have changed for them and what they can't do anymore.
- Conversations flow far more naturally when you are in the habit of talking – i.e. when they are not conversations that have been 'set up'.

Things you could say

- "Would you like to talk to me about it? You just don't seem your normal self. Has something happened?"
- "I am here to help so please tell me what's going on?"
- "I would really like to hear about it. I think I will worry more if you don't tell me."

Help to cope with setbacks

Listen, be patient and encourage them to keep trying no matter what happens. Let them know that setbacks are normal, not a sign that they have failed. Provide reassurance and highlight achievements, even the small ones.

Things you could say

- “I know you are really disappointed about that, it would be been great if you were on top of things by now but you are on the right track – things will get better.”
- “I’m here for you and we will get through it together.”
- “It was great to see you up and about today, I know it was hard.”

Encourage professional help

There are many different types of help available for people with depression and anxiety. They might include counselling, medication and changes to daily routines.

- Encourage the older person to talk with their doctor about the options for treatment and support.
- If they are willing, you could offer to go to the appointment with them for moral support.

- If they have always felt like this, suggest that maybe there are some new things for them to try.

“I just thought if I keep reminding him and telling him that there is something he can do. You can always just make a call. Make an appointment and talk to someone.”

- Victoria

Things you could say

- “You have felt this way for a while now and it has not improved – maybe the doctor might have some ideas about what is happening and what can help?”
- “I know I am not an expert but it sounds like something is going on here. Things are not improving like they have in the past – can we go and see someone and get their advice?”
- “I know not much has helped in the past but maybe it is time to try something new?”
- “Having anxiety or depression is like any other health issue. It can really affect how you feel and what you do, but there are treatments that work really well. I wonder if it is worth talking to your doctor about it?”

Check they are safe

If they are at risk of hurting themselves or someone else you need to talk about it. If you are not sure, ask. Talking about suicide can help you understand what level of support the person needs; it does not make a person think about suicide. Older people generally appreciate your honesty and openness.

- **If they have made plans to end their life you need to act immediately. Call emergency services (triple zero – 000), contact your doctor or mental health crisis service, or go with the person to your local hospital emergency department.**
- If they have had suicidal thoughts but have not made plans, or you are not sure about their safety, encourage them to get help from their doctor, the *beyondblue* Support Service or Lifeline (13 11 14). They, or you, can have a confidential conversation with a trained professional in person or over the phone to make a plan to keep them safe and supported. You don’t have to face this sometimes confronting situation alone.

Things you could say

- “Sometimes when people are feeling like this they think about ending their lives, have you ever had those thoughts?”
- “Have you thought about how and when?”
- “I know things are tough at the moment but we can find some ways to help you – can we call someone together to talk about your options?”

Make a plan together

Your first conversation is a starting point. It lets the older person know that you are worried, provides them with an opportunity to begin to share their experiences and importantly, lets them know you are there to support them.

- Thank them for listening to your concerns and beginning to share their experiences.



- Try to go away from the conversation with a plan that you have made together. The plan might be to talk about it again later, collect some more information or to contact a health service together. Or you might decide to see them more often for a while and see what happens.

Things you could say

- "Have you thought about what you want to do now? Do you want me to help you think about some options?"
- "Would it help if we talked again sometime, maybe we could talk about how I can help you?"
- "You have a lot going on at the moment, thanks so much for sharing your experiences with me. I know that can be really hard to do."

When they don't want to talk and don't want help

Not everyone wants to talk or get help. They may not be ready for others to get involved or they might prefer to speak to their health professional rather than talk openly with their family. Try to understand where they are coming from.

- You don't always have to agree, but should always try to be calm and considerate in what you say.
- Respect their right not to seek help but keep trying to talk to them about it.
- Reassure them that a lot of people face challenges; they are not alone and help is available.
- Remind them that if they were to have a broken foot they would see a doctor – seeking help for how they feel is just as important.



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- Repeat your offer of support if your concerns continue over time.
- Maintain the relationship that you have. The time they spend with you might be one of the highlights in their life at the moment.
- Offer to go with them to the doctor for an assessment if you think they'd find that helpful.
- Give them some written information.
- Keep supporting them.

Talking openly provides the best opportunity to share experiences, learn from each other and offer support. By having conversations – even if they are difficult – we can help them to get the support they need and look forward to a much healthier life.

Have the conversation

- Talk to an older person if you are worried about them.
- Prepare when and what you are going to say.
- Learn more about depression and anxiety in older people.
- Try to understand things from their perspective.
- Value their wisdom and experience.
- Be supportive and ask how you can help.
- Find a balance between helping and respecting their independence.
- Help them understand what support is available.
- Be patient and respect their privacy.
- Let them know that you are there to support them. They are not alone.

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

📞 1300 22 4636

✉️ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Head to Health

headtohealth.gov.au

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



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