

## Mental health care in your golden years

Anxiety. Depression. Bipolar disorder. Schizophrenia.

They're daunting diagnoses, but necessary to think about for many people.

And experts say those concerns don't magically go away when a person reaches age 60 and beyond. Rather, older adults need to keep mental health care in mind and know the resources available to help with concerns unique to that age group.

[Ari Lakritz, PsyD](#), is a clinical psychologist at OSF HealthCare, who has taken a keen interest in this area.

"As individuals grow older, they start to prioritize their emotional needs over their professional, financial or more mundane needs," Dr. Lakritz says. "So you may be surprised when you work with an individual who's older at how quickly they want to work on the problems in their life and how solution-focused they are as compared to their younger cohorts."

Dr. Lakritz has seen plenty of examples of this research-backed idea as he's conducted counseling sessions. For example, an older adult may want to dive right into talking about death or family disputes that have been festering for years.

How does a mental health professional achieve results with this age group? Dr. Lakritz points to a concept called interpersonal therapy, which focuses on a person's relationships and their overall place in the world.

"That is really what older adults have on their mind at this stage of their life. Many of them are retired. For many of them, financial issues or their professional climbing of the ladder have kind of taken a backseat," Dr. Lakritz reiterates. "They are focused on their remaining relationships and making them as good as possible."

A therapy session for an older adult may be structured the same as a younger person's visit. But a psychologist would need to keep in mind the person's needs. If the patient has mobility issues, for example, the office should be easy to get in and out of. If the person is homebound, a home visit or virtual visit would be necessary.

Those telemedicine appointments, Dr. Lakritz says, took on extra importance during the pandemic. Some older adults were already isolated, and COVID fears or government mandates to stay home separated them further from visiting their loved ones and practicing social or coping skills. Card games were replaced with phone calls. A trip to the community theater was scuttled in favor of watching the show on DVD.

"On the plus side, I think everyone saw and was pleasantly surprised at how quickly older adults managed to understand technology," Dr. Lakritz says. "[They] understand remote meetings and how to participate almost as fast as younger adults who also had to adjust very quickly.

"That was a big game changer in the field that is not going away anytime soon," Dr. Lakritz says.

Not to mention the sense of pride from an old dog learning new tricks, as the saying goes.

"It's very much emphasized, even in old age, to continue to pick up new skills. To acquire new knowledge," Dr. Lakritz says. "That does lead to a great deal of self-esteem. And cognitive stimulation, learning new things, reasoning and being intellectually challenged are some of the biggest protective factors against dementia."

One last thing Dr. Lakritz says clinicians should keep in mind when serving older adults: confronting biases or falsehoods about that generation.

For example: older adults are slower workers. The data say that's more folklore than fact, Dr. Lakritz says.

"Many people have this misconception that working with older adults is something that is fundamentally different than working with younger people," Dr. Lakritz says. "[Many think] you need specific, specialized training or you need to be an older adult yourself to work with older adults. And that serves as a barrier to older adults' treatment."

The [OSF HealthCare website](#) outlines mental health resources. Taking a look, then broaching the topic with your older friend or family member is a good first step. A necessary one, too, for some older adults who grew up in a time when "self-care" wasn't a common term.

“If you’re a trusted person in that older adult’s life, and they trust you with more mundane concerns such as helping them get around the house and giving them rides,” Dr. Lakritz explains, “then, I think there’s a good chance they would trust you if you said, ‘I see you’re dealing with this. You’ve been dealing with it for a very long time. You haven’t been able to talk with anyone about it. There is someone we can go to.’”

And make those check-ins with your parents, grandparents and older friends a habit. They’ll be happy you did.