

# Look After Yourself, Look After Your Mental Health

Information Booklet for Older People



National Council on  
Ageing and Older People

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um  
Aosú agus Daoine Aosta



Féidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

# Contents

Introduction	5
Coping with life's changes	6
Retirement	6
Bereavement	7
Decline in physical function	7
Moving from home to care	8
Minding your mental health	9
12 steps to good mental health	9
Keeping active	9
Healthy eating	10
Alcohol	10
Smoking	10
Sleep well	11
Relationships with family and friends	11
Staying socially active	12
Staying mentally active, being creative	12
Intimacy	13
Spirituality	13
Mental health problems	14
Depression	14
Anxiety	14
Dementia	15
Other mental health problems	15
If you are worried about a mental health problem	16
Talk about it	16
Ask for help	16
Look after yourself, look out for others	16
Helplines	17
Other organisations	18

## Introduction

This booklet has been produced as part of the ‘Your Mental Health’ awareness campaign, which aims to improve awareness and understanding of mental health and well-being in Ireland.

It is hoped that this booklet will raise awareness, inform older people about mental health and dispel some fears people may have around mental health as they age. It aims to highlight some of the things we can do to look after our own mental health, encourages us to look out for the people around us and gives an overview of some common mental health problems in later life. It may also be a useful resource for family members, caregivers and friends.

This booklet does not describe in detail the broad range of mental health problems in later life, but it does provide contact information for organisations that provide advice and help on mental health problems for older people in Ireland.

Mental health problems can affect any of us at any time in our lives. Many older people who have mental health problems may not be diagnosed or get treatment. Mental health problems in later life are often a normal consequence of growing old. In reality, detecting and treating a mental health problem early on can lead to significant improvements in mental health and quality of life.

# Coping with life's changes

We experience many changes as we grow older and these can be very stressful, especially if you don't feel prepared or supported.

## — Retirement

It is easy to underestimate the impact of retirement. It may be that your work was central to your life, providing a structure to your day, a sense of purpose and perhaps a social network. It is not unusual to experience mixed feelings about retirement. It may be something you looked forward to, or you may feel rejected or sad that you are leaving an environment you have become very used to. You may feel hurt and angry. Some people worry about how retirement will affect their relationships and if they will have enough money to live on. Whether you are upset or content about retiring, most people feel anxious about what the future will hold.

People find that they have a lot more free time when they retire. Relationships with partners and children often change during retirement. Remember this means an adjustment for both you and your family. Whatever you do, most older people find it is important to keep or develop interests, stay active or become more active, and develop a regular structure to their day.

Many people worry about the financial challenges that retirement may bring. If you are still working, a good thing to do is decide on your goals and plan towards them. Start enquiring about your entitlements and find out what your future income will be. If it's not as much as you'd hoped, you might be able to work a day or two a week to make up the difference. If you are retired and find that financial worries are a cause of distress, contact the Senior Helpline who will listen in confidence and talk about options with you.

## — Bereavement

As an older person, you are likely to have experienced the loss of people close to you over the years – friends, family, maybe even a partner. Losing a partner is painful at any time of our lives, but when you grow older you are likely to feel more vulnerable and less able to cope and move on than if you were younger.

Grief affects us in many ways and is a normal response when we lose someone close to us. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. There will be good days and some bad days. It is okay to enjoy the days that are good and to do things that you enjoy. Keep in touch with your family, friends and other social outlets that have been important to you.

The most important factor in healing from a loss is having the support of other people. Even if you don't normally speak about your feelings, it is important to talk about your feelings when you are grieving. Talking to others who knew the person can often help. Knowing that others understand your grieving will make you feel better, less alone with your pain and will help you heal. Perhaps you can find support from your church, family doctor or your local bereavement services.

## — Decline in physical function

As we grow older, we may see a change in our physical health and in our ability to perform normal daily activities. We may develop a chronic health condition, such as diabetes or heart disease. While these conditions are often managed by medication or by adopting a healthy lifestyle, it can be a very stressful time. It can often mean a change in how we function in our daily lives and may threaten our ability to live independently. It may be difficult to continue participating in regular social activities and this can mean losing contact with our friends and perhaps even loneliness and isolation. At this difficult time, many older people can develop depression. It is important to seek support if you feel like this, talk with your doctor or your Public Health Nurse.

## — Moving from home to care

While most older people continue to live in their own homes, the possibility of having to move into a family member's home or into increased care is something some older people have to consider. This can be very stressful. It can be difficult to know what options are available, where to find information and who to trust at these times. It is often difficult and sad leaving your home. It can be even more difficult when you feel that you do not have a choice.

If you are faced with the need to move from your home, there are many options available. Seek advice and choose the best option for you. Fear of the unknown can make moving from home into care more difficult. There are many things that can be done to make the process easier:

- be involved in the decision-making as much as possible;
- visit the place in which you will be living before you move;
- meet the other residents and become familiar with the staff and environment;
- try to make a plan for your move;
- make a list of who you should contact to tell them about your move, including the post office, utility services, and your friends and neighbours. Don't forget to give them your new address and phone number.

It is normal to feel anxious, stressed or angry at the time of the move and even if you are prepared you can panic. It takes time to settle into any environment and after you have had time to catch your breath it should get easier. Surround yourself with your belongings, photos of family or favourite books. Try to maintain contact with your family and friends and remember to tell people how you are feeling at this time.

Like all stages of life, older age brings its own challenges, but with the support of family, friends and the many organisations ready to listen and help, these challenges can be overcome. If you do feel you need support or just a friendly ear to listen, there are some contact numbers listed at the back of this booklet.

# Minding your mental health

## — 12 steps to good mental health

- 1 Keep physically active.
- 2 Eat well.
- 3 Drink in moderation.
- 4 Value and care for yourself and others.
- 5 Keep in touch with friends and loved ones.
- 6 Get involved and make a contribution.
- 7 Learn new skills.
- 8 Do something creative.
- 9 Get in touch with your spiritual side.
- 10 Get in touch with nature.
- 11 Talk about your feelings.
- 12 Look for help.

## — Keeping active

Exercise has many great benefits for both physical and mental health. It improves mood and maintains physical function. As we grow older we generally lose flexibility. This can mainly be explained by our lack of activity rather than the ageing process itself. As we grow older it is important to maintain good flexibility and range of movement. Maintaining regular physical activity will help prevent the development of health problems as we age, and it can also reduce the impact of health problems on our bodies.

Include physical activity as part of your regular routine. Many of us do this without even realising, for example walking to the shops or the post office, gardening or doing the housework. Exercising can also be a good way to meet people and maintain contacts in your community.

Most exercise is safe for older people, as long as it is tailored to your fitness level and takes into account any health or mobility problems you may have. It is never too late to start! If you are concerned about your level of activity, or would like to take up a new activity, visit your family doctor for a routine check-up and see what would work best for you.

## — Healthy eating

If you eat well, you are likely to feel healthier and happier, stay active for longer and protect yourself against illness. However, you may face challenges to regular healthy eating, such as a decreased appetite, difficulty getting to shops and services, or perhaps after the loss of a partner you are finding it difficult to prepare or eat meals on your own. If you get used to missing meals or not eating healthily, you may start to feel tired, depressed or cold. To keep energy levels up and to stay well it is important to get a good balance of nutrients at mealtimes. We can sometimes start to gain weight as we get older. Remember a little of what you fancy doesn't do any harm, but try to maintain a healthy eating routine. If you are experiencing problems with your appetite or diet you may want to speak with a dietician. Your family doctor will be able to point you in the right direction.

## — Alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol at any age can contribute to memory loss, sleeping difficulties and many other serious health problems. Alcohol is a depressant and overdoing it can increase anxiety and lead to depression. As we grow older, we become more sensitive to the effects of alcohol. It is also important never to mix alcohol with medication, unless your doctor or pharmacist has told you it is safe to do so. Having an occasional drink in company can contribute to a person's quality of life, but don't overdo it. Drink in moderation and remember to have some alcohol free days every week. If you are worried about how much you drink, there is lots of help available. Ask your doctor; they can arrange the right help for you.

## — Smoking

Smoking affects our physical health, but smoking can also affect our mental health. Many people believe that smoking cigarettes can help them to relax and cope with stressful situations, however research shows that smoking actually increases anxiety and tension. Older people are often more successful at quitting smoking than other people. But quitting is never easy at any age. If you are a smoker and want to quit, your doctor can advise on how to go about this or contact the Quitline on 1850 201 203.

## — Sleep well

Many people have problems sleeping and you may find this increases with age. As we grow older the amount of sleep we need declines. Even the occasional night without sleep causes no lasting damage. However, on-going insomnia or sleep disturbance can lead to tiredness, irritability and difficulty concentrating. Following some simple rules can help you develop a regular sleeping pattern:

- avoid tea and coffee in the evenings;
- go to bed and get up at the same time each day;
- keep active;
- if possible, avoid naps during the day.

Long-term lack of sleep can either be a cause or a result of a mental health problem, such as depression or anxiety. If you think this is affecting you, talk to your doctor who will help you identify and treat the problem.

## — Relationships with family and friends

Maintaining relationships with family and friends is important for good mental health. Grandparents play important roles as carer, friend, confidante, and sometimes, tutor for their grandchildren. They are a great source of support for their children.

If you have no family or friends living nearby or have lost touch over the years, this can be a source of distress and loneliness. It is important to remember how many ways you can keep in touch: write a letter, pick up the phone or maybe send an e-mail. Retirement years can provide the opportunity to re-establish old relationships or start new ones. Don't be afraid to get in touch: the good news is that others benefit from your call too!

## — Staying socially active

People of all ages find that social contact is important for their well-being. Retirement offers new opportunities to spend more time with loved ones, to extend your social networks or to build new ones. You can spend more time doing hobbies that you have always enjoyed, return to education, or you may get more involved in local organisations. Engaging in civic or political activity in your area is a good way to have your say and others may benefit from your contribution. If you would like to try something new, find out what's available in your area – ask around, look up the Golden Pages or, if you have access, search the Internet. Your local VEC and Pobal are also good sources of information.

Retirement years are a great time to take up voluntary work. It can provide a new social outlet and give a sense of purpose. Research shows that people of all ages benefit from being in contact with older people. Older volunteers can gain pleasure from using their life experience to benefit younger members of the community.

## — Staying mentally active, being creative

Taking up learning opportunities at any age can enhance your life and help you feel healthier and happier. Libraries are a good resource for independent learners, as well as a source of local information. If you would like to return to some type of formal education, there are a range of courses, including short courses, provided in universities, colleges and local authority education centres.

We often think of winding down as we age but research shows that older people can be just as creative as young people. People who tap into their creativeness as they grow older can accomplish amazing things and sometimes develop talents they never knew they had. Whatever activity you choose, being creative and engaged in the process of learning will bring with it enjoyment and fulfilment.

## — Intimacy

Both men and women can continue to have a satisfying sex life as they grow older. Remember that as an older person, you are entitled to your sexuality. It is perfectly acceptable for you to have sexual feelings and for couples to have sexual feelings about each other. Even if desire and ability to have intercourse has declined, the need for touch and intimacy continues throughout our lives.

## — Spirituality

Our spirituality embraces our ideas about who we are and what our purpose is in life. People of all ages have a spiritual dimension in their lives, whether this is within an organised religion, within another type of group or as an individual. Secular spiritual activities are increasingly available and popular too. This spiritual dimension in our lives has an important influence on our mental health. Spirituality is a deeply personal matter. Discover what works best for you. It is possible to find advice about spiritual practices and traditions from your local services, your local church, the Internet, bookshop, and the Golden Pages.

# Mental health problems

The most common mental health problems experienced by older people are depression and dementia. There is a widespread belief that these problems are a natural part of the ageing process but this is not the case. It is important to remember that most people remain in good mental health throughout their lives.

## — Depression

There are times when we all feel fed up, miserable or sad. Sometimes there is a reason, but sometimes these feelings just come out of the blue. These feelings generally don't last for more than a few days and they don't stop us getting on with our lives. However, you may be experiencing depression if you have any of the following symptoms and if they last for more than two weeks and interfere with your everyday life:

- feelings of sadness or hopelessness;
- difficulties with daily activities;
- difficulties concentrating;
- changes in your sleep pattern;
- changes in your eating pattern.

Depression is not a normal or necessary part of ageing, these symptoms, regardless of your life stage or circumstances, should always be taken seriously and never be dismissed. Both psychological and medical treatments are available to treat depression.

## — Anxiety

Everyone experiences nervousness or worry at different times. This is a normal response to a threat or a stressful situation. However, when these feelings become more intense, ranging from constant worry to fear and panic, it is termed anxiety. The stresses and vulnerabilities associated with getting older can often cause anxiety in later years. The symptoms of anxiety include:

- a racing heart;
- rapid breathing;
- feelings of panic;
- sweating;
- excessive and undue worrying;

- disturbed sleep;
- tense muscles;
- morbid thoughts;
- fear of going mad.

Depending on the type and severity of anxiety, it can have a damaging impact on a person's quality of life. Both psychological and medical treatments are available to treat anxiety.

## — Dementia

Dementia is the name given to a group of diseases that affect the normal working of the brain. Dementia can lead to a decline in mental ability; affecting memory, thinking, problem-solving, concentrating and perception. Alzheimer's Disease is the most common form of dementia. The symptoms of dementia vary according to the stage of the illness. In the early stages, dementia can be difficult to diagnose; the person will experience small changes to their everyday functioning including concentration, decision-making and short-term memory. As the disease progresses, the person will become more confused and forgetful, especially about people's names and recent events. Medication is available which may help with memory loss. They may also get upset easily or become more angry or aggressive, and advice is available regarding managing such symptoms.

The onset of dementia is irreversible, which makes it very different from other mental health problems. There is no certain way to prevent dementia, but evidence suggests that leading a healthy lifestyle and keeping your mind agile by doing activities such as crosswords or puzzles may be helpful. There is continuous research into the best treatment options for sufferers from dementia and we are slowly developing a better understanding of the illness.

Caring for someone with dementia can be physically and emotionally exhausting and it is important to look after your own needs as a carer. You will need on-going support, as well as regular breaks. Draw on friends and other family members for the practical and emotional help they can give. Contact the Carers Association if you need further support.

## — Other mental health problems

It is beyond the scope of this booklet to give details of the full range of mental health problems that older people may experience. For more detailed information on specific mental health problems, contact your doctor.

## If you are worried about a mental health problem ...

### — Talk about it

Many of us feel isolated and overwhelmed by problems sometimes. Talking about how you feel will help. Confide in someone you trust and if you feel there is nobody to talk to, call a helpline such as the Samaritans (1850 609 090) or the Senior Helpline (1850 440 444), which is a confidential listening service for older people by older people.

### — Ask for help

While being diagnosed with a mental illness can be frightening, many people say that being able to put a name to the symptoms you are feeling can be comforting. Knowing what you are experiencing is the first step to recovery. Sorting out whom to talk to and where to get help can be very confusing. The best place to start is often by speaking with your doctor, who can refer you on to the most appropriate service. Bring a family member or friend with you, if it makes you feel more comfortable. Whatever you do, don't be afraid to talk about how you are feeling and ask for help.

## Look after yourself, look out for others

Many older people experience loneliness and isolation. As they suffer the loss of family and friends over time and their social networks weaken, or when they experience reduced functioning, older people can find themselves cut off from the community. While some older people enjoy their own company, this can have a very negative effect on others. If you are in this situation or are aware of someone in this situation, there are many organisations that can provide help. Take the first step and reach out ...

## Helplines

Experience of mental health problems can threaten a person's well-being. It is important to know how and when to get help.

### **Alzheimer Society of Ireland**

Helpline 1800 341 341

[www.alzheimer.ie](http://www.alzheimer.ie)

### **Aware**

Helping to defeat depression

Helpline 1890 303 302 (7 days 10.00 am – 10.00 pm)

[www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)

### **Console**

Supporting those affected by suicide

Helpline 1800 201 890

[www.console.ie](http://www.console.ie)

### **Samaritans**

Befriending service supporting those passing through personal crises

24 Hour Helpline 1850 609 090

[www.samaritans.ie](http://www.samaritans.ie)

### **Senior Helpline**

Confidential listening service for older people by older people

Helpline 1850 440 444

[www.seniorhelpline.ie](http://www.seniorhelpline.ie)

## Other Organisations

### **Active Retirement Ireland**

01 679 2142

[www.fara.ie](http://www.fara.ie)

### **Age Action Ireland**

01 475 6989

[www.ageaction.ie](http://www.ageaction.ie)

### **Age and Opportunity**

01 805 7709

[www.olderinireland.ie](http://www.olderinireland.ie)

### **Carers Association**

057 932 2920

[www.carersireland.com](http://www.carersireland.com)

### **Citizens Information Board**

Lo Call 1890 777 121

[www.citizensinformationboard.ie](http://www.citizensinformationboard.ie)

### **Friends of the Elderly**

01 873 1855

[www.friendsoftheelderly.ie](http://www.friendsoftheelderly.ie)

### **Irish Senior Citizens Parliament**

01 856 1243

[www.seniors.ie](http://www.seniors.ie)

### **Older and Bolder**

01 878 3623

[www.olderandbolder.ie](http://www.olderandbolder.ie)

### **Older Women's Network**

01 884 4536

[www.ownireland.ie](http://www.ownireland.ie)

### **Pobal**

01 240 0700

[www.pobal.ie](http://www.pobal.ie)

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This booklet was produced by the  
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