

Promoting mental health and well-being: seven tips for seniors

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When compared to other age groups, older adults are at higher risk of developing depression. They are more likely to have chronic physical health problems and functional limitations. Physical health problems may be associated with or exacerbate depressive symptoms (e.g., fatigue, apathy), and depression may be associated with or exacerbate physical problems.

The American Psychological Association (APA) reports that up to 20 percent of community-dwelling seniors and 37 percent of nursing home residents have depression. Twenty percent of those who commit suicide are older adults; indeed, seniors have the highest suicide rate in comparison to other age groups (APA). Notably, however, older adults are less likely to have depression recognized and treated than is the case with younger adults. The risk for depression can be reduced, and treatment for depression works!

The Ashland County Older Adult Behavioral Health Coalition (OABHC) promotes awareness of whole-person wellness, including physical wellness, social wellness, mental wellness, emotional wellness and spiritual wellness. This article touches on all wellness domains, which are interrelated and connected. However, it focuses on providing tips for seniors to optimize their own mental health and well-being, setting the stage for successful aging, living well while growing older.

1. Socialize and stay connected with others -- ward off isolation: There are numerous possible ways to stay connected with family members: Attend family gatherings; visit whenever possible; engage in activities with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, participate in activities in which interests and life experiences are shared; create a memory book with a younger family member; and keep in touch by phone, email, texts, Skyping, letters (yes, letters do not have to be a lost art!), greeting cards, notecards and postcards. Never underestimate the value of connecting with a canine or feline companion, one who is or will become a beloved and valued family member.

Consider remaining socially engaged by attending events and activities at local agencies (e.g., Senior Citizen's Center, Ashland County Council on Aging), libraries or community centers, or by joining groups (e.g., book clubs, bridge clubs). Other possibilities include going to church, asking friend(s) over for a meal or to dine out, taking a short trip together or meeting for a shopping excursion. Simply chitchat about local happenings and the news, share anecdotes, etc.

Being socially active will also help you build laughter, fun and humor into your life. In short, keep in touch with family members, friends and neighbors and make new friends along the way!

2. Stay mentally engaged: What you decide to try or to incorporate into your life to remain intellectually active will be influenced by your personal interests, what you think you might enjoy. Consider doing word search puzzles, crossword puzzles or jigsaw puzzles; becoming a whiz on the computer and surfing the net; engaging in crafts and hobbies; reading or listening to audio-books; playing video games and other games; watching TV shows and DVDs that not only provide entertainment but are also educational; learning new things or doing common behaviors in different ways; or going to museums, art galleries and more. Travel to a destination that you have never been to before, or return somewhere that you truly enjoyed in the past. Engage in lifelong learning and take advantage of new and novel educational opportunities. Consider taking an online course or taking a class at a local university or other institution of learning.

In Ashland County, talks or workshops are routinely provided at Ashland County Council on Aging (COA), SALT council meetings, Salvation Army Kroc Center and local libraries. During, June, Ashland County Elder Empowerment Month, the OABHC offers a variety of informative events that might be of interest to you.

3. Attend to physical health needs, stay well: First of all, attend to the basics: Sleep well; eat nutritious, balanced meals; follow dietary restrictions if they have been recommended or ordered; keep an eye on your weight and diet if needed; stay hydrated; and exercise. Speak to your physician about recommendations regarding eating well, improving sleep patterns and exercise routines (before creating an exercise plan, before making your routine more rigorous). With regard to exercise, it can entail daily walks, a trek on a treadmill whereby speed and tension can be adjusted, chair exercises, exercise clubs (check out Silver Sneakers at the local YMCA), dancing and more.

Look after your health and health needs -- keep routine appointments with your primary care physician; keep track of your diagnoses, conditions and symptoms; keep a log of medications prescribed, used and discontinued; follow through with keeping appointments with specialists; follow orders consistently about managing chronic and acute health problems. When orders are not followed, let your physician know that you have made this decision and why. Engage in shared decision-making with your physician(s) and possibly family members or caregivers about treatment options (benefits, risks). Don't automatically eliminate consideration of some treatment options because of your advanced age.

Key to staying well physically is taking care of yourself, being as active as possible and managing or reducing negative stress.

4. Make a spiritual connection: Research reveals that spirituality and religious participation are associated with positive health outcomes, with mental as well as physical health. Spiritual behaviors include prayer, religious rituals, yoga, mindfulness and meditation. Participation in organized religious activities such as going to church or a Bible study also provides the opportunity to socialize and connect with others.

5. Seek support, seek help when struggling with mental health concerns: Support from agencies, friends, family members and others comes in a variety of forms and may enable you to remain as independent as possible, to help you continue to "age in place," to remain well physically and to be socially active. Types of support that may be useful to you include the following: emotional support (companionship, visits from others); transportation (getting you to and from activities, events that are of interest); legal counsel; housekeeping; and assistance with home maintenance or repairs, mowing and shoveling. For information about services available to you, contact COA (419-281-1477) or Area Agency on Aging District 5 (800-860-5799).

In addition to receiving emotional support from others, it is also important to seek help from professionals when struggling with mental health concerns. Since mental health concerns are frequently linked to physical health diagnoses or symptoms, it makes sense that the first professional that a senior may visit is the primary care physician. When symptoms are described and concerns are addressed, lab work and other testing may be ordered, physical health conditions may be ruled out before a mental health diagnosis (e.g., depression) is given, and nonpharmacological approaches may be discussed. In some instances, the next step will be to see a mental health professional for treating and managing symptoms, for learning how to manage stress if that is adversely affecting your emotional and physical health, with psychotropic use being the last resort in many instances.

6. Make a difference by volunteering, mentoring and helping others. All of these have positive mental, physical and social benefits for the senior. As volunteers, seniors can offer expertise, can share what they've learned from a lifetime of experiences, can provide companionship and care and can serve as mentors.

Volunteer possibilities are extensive: Apply to serve as a volunteer on a board of an agency or organization which has a mission that you are passionate about; or volunteer at a nursing home, animal shelter, a senior organization, a nonprofit to help with fundraising efforts, grant writing or mailings and promotional efforts. If you are interested in tutoring and mentoring elementary school children, check out the Multigenerational Mentoring Program, offered in

both Ashland and Loudonville (for information, contact Fredy Robles or Celia Cureton, Catholic Charities, 419-289-1903). Making a difference does not require participation in an organization; it can involve making the time to go and visit someone who is homebound, to help someone go to the grocery store and shop, to do several things to help a stressed-out caregiver who needs a break.

If you are interested, consider finding ways to be an active advocate for or work on causes that you care most about -- child or elder abuse, dementia advocacy, anti-ageism, social justice, animal protection, rights of individuals with serious mental illnesses, homelessness, literacy, opiate addiction, etc. Make a difference; you have the power to do so!

7. Promote emotional wellbeing through creative writing. Seniors can benefit from creative writing of all forms, which promotes wellbeing, reduces stress and helps to clarify thinking about current and past experiences. Writing life stories, legacy writing and creating memoirs that can be shared or even created/written with others offers a way to maintain or strengthen relationships. All provide the opportunity to share experiences, to express insights and values, to offer words of wisdom in ways that can be easily passed down to future generations. Also, it can be very meaningful and rewarding to help others write their own life stories (e.g., care recipients, including those living with dementia).

A "Writing for Recovery" writing group, supported by the MHRB, may be of interest to seniors who are facing significant life challenges (e.g., grief, caregiver stress and burnout) or coping with anxious or depressive symptoms. Please contact Hillary Wertman, MHRB, for further information (hwertman@ashlandmhrb.org, 419-281-3139). Your decisions about what you incorporate into your life to optimize mental health and wellbeing in multiple domains will be influenced by your physical health status, functional limitations, your preferences and interests, what activities you find to be most meaningful and where you reside. However, it is possible to tailor activities to meet your specific desires and needs, accounting for your functional/health status, regardless of where you live. For example, nursing homes provide activities and opportunities to be socially engaged, physically active and intellectually engaged.

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