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Australian
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**▶ WHAT TO DO
WHEN OLDER PEOPLE
FEEL SAD**

WHAT TO DO WHEN OLDER PEOPLE FEEL SAD

As a support worker, you help older people in many different ways.

In addition to any tasks you might do, you provide companionship.

Sometimes, older people feel sad or do not show an interest in their usual activities.

The information in this brochure could help you to support them in the best way possible.

Getting to know each other

Each older person and each support worker is an individual.

Take time to get to know each other, especially if you have different backgrounds.

Ask questions about the person's life. Where did they grow up? Did they have a job? Ask about their family life.

Respect boundaries. Only disclose about your own experiences if it will help to build your relationship with the older person.

Find out what the person is interested in and what they like to do.

Ask if there are any activities they have always wanted to learn. Knit? Woodwork? Play bocce? Mahjong?

Be curious. Ask questions like: "That's a lovely photograph. Who is that? Where was that photo taken?" "Tell me more about..."

"I want my support workers to understand my values and interests. To know what I like and don't like." Helena, recipient of a home care package.

"I notice when my clients have lost their spark because I have been visiting them for a long time and know them so well." Rahul, support worker in an aged care home.



Why older people may feel sad

Older people may experience:

- Isolation from friends, family and their community
- The death of a life partner, family members and friends
- Difficulty completing tasks that were once simple
- Boredom
- Declining physical health
- Chronic pain
- Changes in living arrangements (e.g. moving out of the family home)
- Loss of drivers licence or ability to drive
- Admissions to hospital
- Side-effects from medications
- Financial difficulty
- Non-death losses: work, independence, self-worth, mobility, eyesight, hearing

HELPFUL THINGS YOU CAN DO

1. Notice changes in mood and behaviour
2. Have an informal chat
3. Listen
4. Check you have understood
5. Show understanding and support

1. NOTICE CHANGES IN MOOD AND BEHAVIOUR

Noticing changes is a key starting point.

When you notice an older person is sad and withdrawn, let them know that you have noticed changes.

Example question: "I notice you haven't been to your Tai Chi class for a while. Is there something I can help with? Are you in pain?"

"I want a support worker to notice that I haven't attended any activities over past week or so. This requires them having a relationship with me – to take an interest when my behaviour changes." Robert, resident in an aged care home.



Behaviours that may indicate a change in mood

- Lacking energy
- Not sleeping well
- Spending more time in bed
- Not enjoying meals
- Not motivated to do things they normally enjoy
- Not wanting to go out
- Wanting to be left alone
- Withdrawing from family and friends
- Not talking as much as usual
- Irritable/angry
- Feeling worthless
- Saying things like: "I've had enough"
- Talking about life not being worth living

"Changes in behaviour may be due to an older person's hearing or eyesight. So the first thing I check is their hearing aid and glasses. Do they need their hearing or eyesight assessed?"
Aasika, support worker in an aged care home.

2. HAVE AN INFORMAL CHAT

Don't hesitate to talk with an older person if you are worried about them.

Ask: "How are you going?"

A conversation can help people feel more supported and less alone.

Raise the topic in a way that feels comfortable to you. Be genuine.

Conversations are best in a relaxed environment.

Make the conversation as normal as possible. Conversations flow far more naturally when you are in the habit of talking with each other.

"I only talk with support workers who I know and trust. It might not be an organised conversation. We just chat while she cleans my house." Giuseppe, recipient of a home care package.

Ask whether the older person would like to have a cup of tea or coffee in a quiet place. Use the older person's name.

"When I visited Mary, she didn't seem to be herself. She was withdrawn. She did not want to do the things she normally loved. I made her a cup of tea and asked her if she wanted to talk." Geetika, a home care support worker.

The best place to start the conversation is with an open question:

- ◆ How are you today?
- ◆ What's on your mind?
- ◆ How are you feeling?

"Sometimes I just need to talk. I want a conversation not an interrogation. The support worker could simply say: "I notice you are not yourself today. Would you like to talk about it?" I want the support worker to listen and validate how I am feeling." Katherine, a recipient of a home care package.

Not wanting to talk about feelings

Some older people have never talked about how they feel; this wasn't the thing to do when they were growing up.

Some older people put on a brave face. They are reluctant to talk about their thoughts and feelings because they don't want to be a burden.

Accept that an older person might not be ready to talk.

Ask a closed question for quick information, such as:

- ◆ Is something hurting you?
- ◆ How are you sleeping?
- ◆ Is anything in particular upsetting you?

If the older person is reluctant to talk, be patient. Sometimes a quiet moment gives

an older person time to work out how to express how they feel.

Help them to feel at ease and follow their lead. A silence may make you feel uncomfortable at first but see it as a chance for you both to gather your thoughts.

Some people may not speak English as their first language. Do they need an interpreter?

Some people prefer not to talk about their feelings with a support worker.

Let the older person know you are happy for them to talk with you another time.

"When I feel out of sorts, I just want to be left alone. I don't want to explain to a support worker why I am feeling low. I don't want to be jollied along. I just want them to go ahead and do the work." Trudi, recipient of a home care package

3. LISTEN

The most helpful thing you can do is listen.

Listen with genuine interest – to better understand how the older person is feeling.

Use body language to show you are listening. Look at the person and turn your head or entire body towards them while they speak.

Some older people may have hearing loss and use lip reading to help understand what is being said. Make sure they can see your mouth.

Listen in a way that shows you value what is being said.

It's important to give brief verbal responses to show that you hear what the older person is saying. Short words such as "okay", "Uh-huh", and "I see" while the person is talking show that you are listening.

If the person becomes emotional, let them know that it's okay to cry. Offer things such as tissues or a handkerchief to provide comfort and understanding.

Resist the temptation to offer solutions.

4. CHECK YOU HAVE UNDERSTOOD

Everyone's experience is unique.

Try to understand things from the older person's perspective.

Check with the older person that you have correctly understood what they have said.

**"Having my feelings validated brought a sense of relief. It was helpful to be able to talk about my husband and share my memories of him."
Denise, resident in an aged care home**

"I want support workers to understand how I am feeling. I don't want advice about how to fix it." Patricia, resident in an aged care home



5. SHOW UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT

Recognise and acknowledge how an older person is feeling. Focus on being present for them.

Ask: "Do you want to talk about some ways that might help tackle the problem?"

Still worried?

It's okay for an older person to feel sad for a day or a few days. It's concerning when a low mood is persistent.

It is not inevitable that older people feel sad and lose interest in activities.

Let the older person know you are happy for them to continue to talk with you.

Ask the older person if they have someone with whom they would like to have a chat (e.g. family, friend, neighbour, GP).

If an older person continues to feel sad and lack motivation, you should let your supervisor know.

It may indicate that they have a more serious health condition. They should probably see a doctor for a check-up or speak to a mental health professional. Continue to report to your supervisor if the situation does not change.

If the older person expresses thoughts of suicide, contact your supervisor immediately.



Where to go for helpful resources

www.aag.asn.au/education/mh-resources

CONTRIBUTORS

This resource was developed for AAG by Dr Sarah Russell, Principal Researcher at Research Matters and an aged care and mental health advocate, in consultation with older people and aged care support workers. Health and aged care professionals and academic experts provided guidance to ensure that the content was appropriate and reflected the current evidence on older people's mental health.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Australian Association of Gerontology (AAG) acknowledges Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples including members of the Stolen Generations. For further information see AAG's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ageing Advisory Group (ATSIAAG).



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To improve the experience of ageing through
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