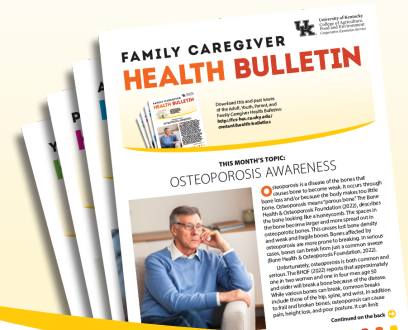




University of Kentucky
College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment
Cooperative Extension Service

FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN



MARCH 2023

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THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE



The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can save lives. This three-digit universal phone number launched in July 2022 to connect people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress directly to the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Anyone can use this number, including friends, family, and caregivers of the person in crisis. The national network of local crisis centers and mental health professionals provides free and confidential emotional support 24/7 365 days a year.



Suicide is a serious concern among all ages. The National Council on Aging (NCOA) recognizes the rising rates of suicide among older adults, especially older men. According to the NCOA, some older adults are vulnerable to depression and suicide intent based on circumstances related to aging that affect life quality. Examples include the grief and loss of meaningful relationships, loneliness, loss of independence, chronic pain and illness, isolation,

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world-wide pandemics, feeling like a burden, cognitive impairment, decrease in or loss of mobility and/or the sensory system, food insecurities, financial challenges, and worrying about health and safety. Alone or in accumulation, such struggles can become too much to bear, increasing an older adult's risk for depression and feelings of hopelessness. But depression is not a "normal" part of aging. Depression is treatable. Dr. Reed, from the Education Development Center, emphasizes that we need to stop assuming older adults are automatically sad, in pain, and lonely because of their circumstance. Instead, we need to watch behavior and listen to older adults so that mental health issues are recognized and acknowledged. Health-care professionals need to do a better job using screening instruments to recognize mental health struggles.

Signs and symptoms of suicide risk in older adults:

- Change in sleep habits
- Talking about a life without them
- Giving away belongings
- Unexplained sadness
- Neglecting self-care, including medical routines
- Self-isolation or avoiding activities
- Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy
- Eating and drinking less or not at all
- Lack of personal safety
- Sharing feelings of hopelessness and lack of self-worth
- Preoccupation with death

To help an older adult suffering from depression and/or suicidal thoughts:

- Understand that depression and suicidal thoughts are not a normal part of aging.
- Know the warning signs of suicide.
- Keep older adults connected. Plan daily or weekly visits or calls, and organize check-ins.
- Reinforce a person's sense of meaning and purpose by focusing on the positive, capitalizing on their wisdom, skill, or talent, and using words of encouragement.
- Create events or activities that provide anticipation or a reason to get out of bed.
- Talk to older adults about how they are feeling and doing.

- Make sure older adults are getting routine check-ups.
- Talk to health-care providers about your concerns and about options to screen and treat depression.
- Locate community organizations that offer counseling, support, and/or fellowship.
- Call 911 or go to the emergency room if you think an older adult is in immediate danger.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline recommends the following steps if you know someone who is suicidal:

- 1. Ask questions . . . and listen.** Questions like "Are you thinking about suicide?" "How do you hurt?" and "How can I help?" will help you listen and acknowledge their feelings and assess your next steps. Help the person focus on their reasons for living. Do not impose your reasons for them to stay alive.
- 2. Be there.** Being present whether it is face-to-face or even by phone, provides a sense of connection. Be sure to follow through with anything that you promise.
- 3. Help keep them safe.** Keep the person in a secure and private place, free of any means of harm. Do not leave them alone until you can secure help. The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be an important resource for next steps.
- 4. Help them connect.** Support systems, including 988, can be helpful in the present and in a future crisis.
- 5. Follow up.** Studies show that checking in with people — calls, texts, notes, messages, etc. — can mean the difference between life and death. This type of contact reinforces connection and ongoing support.

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- Rope, K., and Smith, M. (reviewer). WebMD. (2021). What to Know About Suicide Rates in Older Adults. Retrieved January 20, 2023, from <https://www.webmd.com/healthy-aging/features/suicide-rates-older-adults>
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. For more information, go to: <https://988lifeline.org>

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