

**You're Never Too Old  
to Feel  
*Good***



**A Consumer Guide to  
Emotional Health for the Elderly**

## Why is this guide important?

In the past many people did not go for help when they were feeling sad, nervous or anxious. Many people felt it was better to keep “a stiff upper lip.” This guide will help you decide if there are parts of your life that you can feel better about. It will also give you information on what you can do to take control and join the many other seniors who are taking steps to feel better.

**It is important to be prepared.** Perhaps you have never spoken to a professional about your feelings or emotional health. Perhaps you have never given them much thought. Some people may even feel embarrassed to talk about their feelings. However, times are changing.

More and more people are talking about how they feel. More and more people are recognizing that emotional health can be as important to a person as their physical health. Today, of the nearly 35 million Americans age 65 and older, about 2 million have a depressive illness.



Over 11 percent of people 55 and older have an anxiety disorder. As you can see, it is not uncommon to have an emotional issue to cope with. This guide can help you take control and get the care you need to feel good.

## You're Never Too Old to Feel Good

You might be surprised to learn that many older people suffer from things like anxiety and depression. You also might be surprised to learn that this is not a natural result of aging. Most mental health issues in the elderly can, in fact, be treated. This guide was designed to educate you and your loved ones about mental health issues that affect seniors. Many older adults receive treatment for their emotional health just as they get treatment for their physical health. As a result, they are leading happier and more productive lives.

It is never too late for you to be happy or free from anxiety or depression.

Whether you are in a nursing home or assisted living or living at home, there are ways to get help that **respects you and your privacy**. This guide will help you learn more about some **common conditions and what you can do to make things better**.



**This guide has a special focus — to give you important information that will help you to take control and get good care to feel better about life.**

The information that follows is written in a way that speaks directly to you. However, it can also be helpful to your family and friends. If you are a friend or family member of an older adult, think about him or her when reading the guide.

## How are you feeling?

Take a moment to think about how you have been feeling lately.

- Are you experiencing unfamiliar or uncomfortable feelings?
- Have you reached a point in your life where you are feeling out of sorts?

Changes in the way you feel can be caused by many factors. Illness, medication, genetics and even events that happen in your daily life can affect your mood. Things affect people differently. What seems to be a minor incident to one person may be very upsetting to someone else. Also, things that would have seemed unimportant in the past may take on more meaning as you get older. In other words, there is no “right” or “wrong” when it comes to your reactions or feelings.

Certain types of events are likely to stir up bad feelings. Below is a list of problems that are often the cause of upset for older folks. Have any of these been on *your* mind?

- Loss (i.e., loss of companionship, loss of independence)
- Conflict (i.e., disagreements with family or friends)
- Money issues (i.e., changing jobs, retirement, needing money)
- Health care concerns (i.e., illness, loss of mobility, loss of bodily control, memory problems, fears of being a burden to loved ones)

It is normal for people to have ups and downs. But if your mood starts to affect your ability to enjoy your life or be productive, it is time to speak to a professional about helping you feel better.

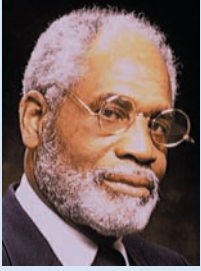
- Issues relating to aging (i.e., uncertainty about what the future holds, end of life issues, concern about being disabled or becoming dependent on your children)
- Social life (i.e., feeling lonely, worries about making new friends)
- Housing concerns (i.e., moving, loss of home, going into a new type of home such as a nursing home or senior housing)
- World events (i.e., recent terrorist attacks or war)

People may experience changes in mood and how they function in different ways. It can sometimes be hard to explain to others what you are feeling. Below are descriptions of some common mood changes or symptoms. Please read the descriptions and see if any of them describe the way you have been feeling.

## **Common Symptoms**

### **ANXIETY**

Anxiety is a feeling of worry that is very strong. Sometimes it is so strong that it can interfere with your ability to enjoy your life or participate in activities. If you have been feeling jittery, nervous or irritable you might have anxiety. People with anxiety sometimes are not able to relax or sleep well. They may feel nauseous, have diarrhea, startle easily (be easily frightened) or feel like their heart is racing. They may be more distracted than usual and have poor attention. People with anxiety might find themselves avoiding certain situations because of fear or feeling uncomfortable.



### *Earl's Story*

Earl entered the nursing home a year ago. Everyone who knew Earl liked

him. He was friendly to staff and was active in activities. Now he seems very irritable. He snaps at the staff and doesn't seem to remember when his favorite activity times are, so he misses them even though he wants to go. He often paces around the home or lies awake at night. Earl is suffering from anxiety.

An anxiety disorder is an illness that can keep you from enjoying your life. If the story above reminds you of yourself, you may have an anxiety disorder.

The checklist below contains symptoms of anxiety. Please read the list and ask yourself if you are experiencing any of the following often:

- Worrying a lot
- Feeling restless or edgy
- Having a hard time concentrating
- Getting angry easily or feeling irritable
- Trouble sleeping
- Disruption of daily life activities due to emotional distress

There are many seniors who have anxiety and get treatment to feel better. If you think you may be suffering from anxiety, please speak to

your professional caregiver today about positive steps you can take to feel better.

## **DEPRESSION**

Depression is not just a passing feeling of sadness. It is a sad feeling that lasts for a long time or comes frequently.

Some signs of depression are: loss of interest in activities, changes in sleep and appetite, crying spells, feelings of hopelessness, guilt or worthlessness, increased thoughts of death, suicidal thoughts, decreased energy, decreased concentration and sometimes memory problems.

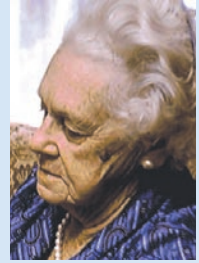
The checklist below contains symptoms of depression. Read the list and ask yourself if you often experience any of the following:

- Sad or empty mood
- Loss of interest in activities
- Change in sleep or appetite
- Feelings of guilt
- Problems with concentration
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Disruption of daily life due to distress

### *Mary's Story*

Mary has not been feeling quite like herself lately. She has been feeling blue and can't seem to get interested in gardening and cooking, although she used to love these activities up until a few months ago. She just can't seem to get the energy up to see her friends. She hasn't been eating or sleeping well and is starting to look thin and tired. She has always considered herself emotional, but now she is crying more easily than usual and about things that would not have upset her before.

Mary is suffering from depression, an illness that can rob you of your ability to enjoy life. If this story sounds like it could be written about you, you may be suffering from depression too.



Remember, like anxiety, depression is a treatable illness. If you think you may be suffering from depression, please speak to your professional caregiver today.

## **PSEUDODEMENTIA**

Pseudodementia is a condition that results from depression. Symptoms of pseudodementia are similar to those found in dementia. However, dementia is an illness caused by changes in the brain that result in a gradual impairment of memory, judgment, attention and other thinking skills. It is important to make sure that if you have pseudodementia, you do not receive a diagnosis of dementia because while dementia is not reversible, pseudodementia is. An incorrect diagnosis can keep you from getting the treatment you need. If you are becoming concerned about your memory, please speak to a professional.

## **Treatment Options**

There are many different treatments available today. They can help you feel better, adjust to difficult circumstances and improve the way you are living your life. You can take control by finding out your options for treatment and taking positive steps. Below are some options for care that have worked for people like you. Please look at some of the possibilities and talk to your doctor or nurse about what might be right for you.

## **MEDICAL CARE**

As mentioned before, emotional changes may have a medical cause. One of the first steps to take in seeking treatment is to see a medical doctor to discuss your symptoms. Your doctor may wish to perform tests to determine if you are having any physical problems.



For example, you may be checked for thyroid problems or a urinary tract infection. If your symptoms have a medical cause, they are treated by dealing with the medical problem.



## **PSYCHOLOGICAL CARE**

People used to be afraid to talk to a professional about their feelings. But now, more and more elderly people are taking action to feel better. Seeing a psychologist or other licensed mental health professional is a positive step for many people, who find that it is a good way to help feel better. A psychologist can help you talk about how you are feeling, understand why the feelings developed and find ways to help you feel good again.

## **MEDICATION**

A medical doctor specializing in emotional health may prescribe medicine to help people who are feeling anxious or depressed. This method is often used in addition to psychological care. More and more medications are being developed to help people feel better emotionally. However, it is important that you be informed and work closely with your doctor if you choose to use medication. It is important to understand any potential side effects of the medication so you can see if the benefits outweigh the possible problems. It is also important to ask your doctor when you can expect to feel better so that you give the medicine enough time to work (some medicines work fast, while others take a while to take effect). You should always talk to your doctor before stopping any medication. Some medicines may cause harmful side effects if stopped suddenly.

## In Conclusion...

Growing older can often mean facing major life changes you have not experienced before. **It is not unusual to feel anxious or overwhelmed.**

Many people your age experience anxiety or other emotional problems. More and more of them are getting help because they know that these problems are not a natural result of getting old. There is nothing wrong with needing help with your emotions. **Being able to recognize and face a problem is a sign of strength and courage.**

In the past, people did not like to discuss their emotions openly. However, the truth is that emotional problems are increasingly recognized as being important issues for seniors like you. Remember: more than one out of ten people over 55 have an anxiety disorder. Millions of people over 65 have depression. **If you are not feeling good, you are not alone.**

Taking care of your emotional health can help you enjoy life more – no matter where you are in your life. There are many options available to help you feel better and take control of your feelings. **You do not have to settle for feeling bad!**

You have the power to help the uncomfortable feelings go away. You do not have to suffer endlessly. Relief is available. Experienced professionals are available to assist you in getting your life back on track. **You do not have to go through this alone.**

Speak to a licensed professional about getting help. If you feel uncomfortable doing that, tell a friend or family member and ask him or her to speak to a professional with you. **Do not wait for someone to ask you how you are feeling.**

## Resources for More Information

### **American Psychological Association**

750 First Street NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242

800-374-2721; 202-336-5500

Online Help Center: [www.apahelpcenter.org](http://www.apahelpcenter.org)

### **Gerontological Society of America**

1030 15th St. NW, Suite 250, Washington, DC 20005

202-842-1275 · [www.geron.org](http://www.geron.org)

### **Alzheimer's Association National Office**

225 N. Michigan Ave., Floor 17, Chicago, IL 60601

Nationwide Contact Center: 800-272-3900 · [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

### **American Geriatrics Society**

The Empire State Building

350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 801, New York, NY 10118

212-308-1414 · Referral Service: 800-563-4916

[www.americangeriatrics.org](http://www.americangeriatrics.org)

### **Eldercare Locator**

800-677-1116 [www.eldercare.gov/eldercare/Public/Home.asp](http://www.eldercare.gov/eldercare/Public/Home.asp)

---

## Acknowledgements

This guide has been written and produced by the Long Term Care Community Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving long term care and quality of life for the elderly and disabled.

Cynthia Rudder, Ph.D., Executive Director

Richard J. Mollot, Esq., Associate Director

242 West 30th Street, Suite 306 • New York, NY 10001

212-385-0355 (T) • 212-239-2801 (F)

[www.ltccc.org](http://www.ltccc.org) • [www.assisted-living411.org](http://www.assisted-living411.org) • [www.nursinghome411.org](http://www.nursinghome411.org)

Dr. Eric Garfinkel and Dr. Barbara Gluckin of PsychAssociates Group contributed to the research and preparation of materials.

PsychAssociates Group

910 West End Avenue, Suite 1C • New York, NY 10025 • 212-662-9200

The authors would like to thank all of those who pilot tested the guide. Your input was very valuable.

Design and layout by Pattie Stone, [www.pattiedesign.com](http://www.pattiedesign.com).

**Funding for this project was from the Lorazepam and Clorazepate Antitrust Litigation Settlement administered by the New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.**

Copyright © 2005 LTCCC and its licensors. All rights reserved.

# You're Never Too Old to Feel *Good*

## Important Things to Remember...

- Mood changes are not something that you have to accept as part of getting older. You can feel better.
- Treatment can be effective at any age. Many people your age are getting treatment and are feeling better about their lives.
- You can take control of your life. If your professional caregivers do not realize you need help, you may have to tell them.
- Sometimes people feel uncomfortable talking about their emotions, even with a doctor or nurse. It is OK to discuss your feelings.
- Try to discuss your feelings as openly as possible.
- When seeking treatment, take this guide with you to help you talk about your feelings.