

Anxiety and Older Adults

Ways to Identify and Manage Anxiety in Seniors



PRESBYTERIAN
SENIOR LIVING

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 3

In this Guide 3

Recognizing the Symptoms of Anxiety in Older Adults..... 4

- Physical Symptoms
- Behavioral Changes

2. Understanding the Causes of Anxiety in Seniors..... 5

- Medical Conditions
- Life Transitions
- Medication Side Effects and Interactions
- Fear of Losing Independence or Dignity

3. Incorporating Relaxation and Stress-Relief Techniques 6

- Deep Breathing and Gentle Exercise Routines
- Journaling
- Creating a Comfortable Living Space
- Building a Daily Routine

4. The Role of Therapy and Counseling 7

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CT)
- Therapies Who Specialize in Geriatric Mental Health
- Group Therapy Options and Support Networks

5. Medication Management for Anxiety in Seniors 8

- Prescription Medications
- Potential Side Effects and Precautions

Conclusion 9



Introduction

As we age, it's common for feelings of anxiety to arise, often due to changes in health, routine, and life circumstances. For seniors, it's crucial to effectively manage anxiety. Whether it's due to physical limitations, social isolation, or the uncertainties that come with aging, understanding and addressing it can significantly improve overall well-being and quality of life.

Inside this Guide

In this guide, we'll share practical strategies and support options to help seniors manage anxiety and cultivate a sense of calm and security. We'll discuss everything from recognizing the warning signs of anxiety to structuring days so stress is reduced.



1 Recognizing the Symptoms of Anxiety in Older Adults

If you are like the majority of people, you may not be aware that anxiety can be expressed in many different ways. Often the only symptom people identify with this condition is restlessness. But there are others, especially in older adults. Those frequently include:

- **Physical Symptoms:** Restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, and wringing of hands can all be signs of anxiety.
- **Behavioral Changes:** Withdrawal from activities, sleep disturbances, and excessive worry can all be indicative of an older adult who is struggling to manage anxiety.



② Understanding the Causes of Anxiety in Seniors

As we age, the situations and events that trigger anxiety can change. For example, in our younger days, we might be stressed by the difficulties of juggling a growing family and a fast-paced career. When we are older, however, we are often faced with different but equally demanding challenges:

- **Medical Conditions:** It's an unfortunate reality that with age often comes an increase in health problems. A chronic illness or even a pending surgery can take a toll on your mental health.
- **Life Transitions:** Change can be difficult at any time of life, but especially as we age. And growing older is typically associated with numerous transitions—retiring from a career, the deaths of family and friends, and downsizing from a house that was home for many years.
- **Medication Side Effects and Interactions:** Another potential cause of a senior's anxiety might be medication. In some cases, it is a side effect of a prescribed drug. Other times, interactions between medications may be the culprit.
- **Fear of Losing Independence or Dignity:** When an age-related decline in health means a senior is no longer able to independently perform daily tasks, they might experience fear of what the future holds. Worries about who will help them and how they will manage are common.



③ Incorporating Relaxation and Stress Relief Techniques

If your parent or other senior loved one is experiencing mild anxiety, it might be possible to treat it at home without medical intervention. A few options for you to explore could be:

- **Deep Breathing and Gentle Exercise Routines:** Anxiety can cause shallow breathing and tension throughout the body. Practices that encourage better breathing, such as chair yoga, meditation, Pilates, and walking, can all help reduce anxiety.
- **Journaling:** Another option with proven health benefits is journaling. Whether you write down your thoughts and fears each day or [create a gratitude journal](#) that promotes positive thinking, it's a practice known to help reduce stress.
- **Creating a Comfortable Living Space:** Don't overlook the benefits of creating a space that supports success. For example, if a senior is fearful of falling, reduce that anxiety by installing grab bars in key locations, improving lighting, and getting rid of tripping hazards like rugs. Senior living communities incorporate features like these in their buildings.
- **Building a Daily Routine:** As you may have noticed in your own life, following a daily routine can give you a sense of security. For people with anxiety, that structure can be especially helpful in fostering stability and peace.



4 The Role of Therapy and Counseling

When a person's anxiety can't be resolved holistically, they might need to seek advice from a mental health professional. An older adult's primary care physician may recommend therapy to help a patient learn more about the reason for the anxiety and how to manage it in everyday life. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a psychological treatment that helps individuals identify and change negative thought patterns and behaviors. It focuses on improving emotional regulation and developing coping strategies for managing stress and challenges.

- **Therapists Who Specialize in Geriatric Mental Health:** Finding someone who specializes in CBT for older people might be a step to consider. If your physician doesn't have a recommendation, you can [search the online database](#) for the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies.
- **Group Therapy and Support Networks:** Connecting with people who are experiencing similar struggles is beneficial for a variety of health conditions, including anxiety. You can likely find both nearby in-person options and online forums.



⑤ Medication Management for Anxiety for Seniors

Finally, a senior with anxiety that can't be managed through other avenues might need to talk with their physician about pharmacological interventions. It might only be necessary until the cause of the anxiety is resolved or better navigated. Here are a few things to know:

- **Prescription Medications:** Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), are used to help manage symptoms of anxiety. These medications require careful monitoring due to potential side effects and interactions with other age-related health conditions.
- **Potential Side Effects and Precautions:** Because older adults metabolize medications differently than younger people, it's important to keep an eye on any changes you detect. Anti-anxiety medications can cause side effects such as dizziness, sedation, memory issues, and an increased risk of falls or confusion.

This guide provides general information only, not medical advice. Always consult your healthcare provider before starting, changing, or stopping any medication. Individual responses to anxiety medications vary, especially among seniors. Never self-medicate—all medications discussed require proper medical supervision and prescription.



Conclusion

Understanding what's behind a loved one's anxiety is the first step in finding a solution for treating it. In some situations, a senior living community can be the answer. Among the many benefits of community life are reduced anxiety and greater confidence. We encourage you to call a PSL community near you to learn more today.

[View Our Community List](#)



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