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Mental Health and Baby Boomers: Reducing Stigma Key to Healthy Aging

By *Adriana Urtubey, MD*

As members of the Baby Boomer generation reach what was once considered their “golden years,” many are re-defining what it means to be an older adult. Instead of retirement and rocking chairs, they’re working longer and living more active lifestyles than their parents ever did. But while Baby Boomers tend to be more physically healthy than previous generations, many of my patients struggle to address a key component to overall wellness: their mental health.

People are often surprised to learn that rates of mental health disorders are rising fastest among Baby Boomers: it’s estimated that 20 percent of people age 55 or older experience some type of mental health issue, and the number of older adults with depression is expected to double between 2010 and 2030. We go through a lot of changes as we age -- such as death of loved ones, medical problems, or retirement -- that can make us feel uneasy, stressed or sad. Social isolation or the stress of acting as a caregiver can also negatively impact older adults’ mental health. It’s normal to go through an adjustment period after experiencing this kind of life event before starting to feel well again. But if these feelings persist and begin interfering with daily life and normal functioning, it’s time to seek the treatment needed to feel better. Unfortunately older adults are often hesitant to reach out for help due to persistent stigma around mental health issues and gen-

erational differences in how these disorders are perceived. Untreated mental health conditions can have serious consequences, including increased risk of suicide or worsening of co-occurring medical conditions.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, a national observance dedicated to raising awareness about prevention, treatment, and recovery support resources available in our communities. It’s also an opportunity for each of us to reach out and offer support and encouragement to a friend or loved one who may be struggling. If you want to help someone you care about get the support they need, here is some advice for starting the conversation:

- **Show that you’re concerned in a way that is not confrontational or judgmental.** Let them know that you care about them, and you want to check in because you’re concerned about recent changes you’ve noticed in their mood or behavior.

- **Keep questions simple.** Ask how they’re doing, what they’re feeling, and how you can help provide support. The Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) is available free on the internet and can be a helpful guide for what questions to ask.

- **Offer reassurance and hope.** Let them know that they’re not alone, and that you’re there to support them in actively seeking help to feel better.



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- **Avoid phrases that could sound dismissive or accusatory.** Although you may not understand what they’re feeling, it’s important to only express your unwavering support.

- **Suggest reaching out to a local recovery support resource.** Ask if they have thought about seeking support from a professional trained to help with these types of issues. Consider having some suggestions ready to share, or offer to research local resources together.

- **Consider cultural barriers and needs when approaching your loved one.** Keep in mind that mental health stigma and access to care can vary among different communities. For example African Americans and Hispanic Americans utilize mental health services at about one-half the rate of Caucasian Americans, and Asian Americans at about one-third the rate.

- **After your initial conversation, stay engaged with your loved one and check in regularly.** Having consistent support from family and friends can make a huge difference in people’s well-being. Encourage your loved one to stay in touch and even expand their social interactions by visiting a local senior center or starting a new hobby that gets them out of the house.

Raising awareness and reducing stigma around mental health issues are keys to supporting wellbeing within our communities. It’s up to all of us to reach out and encourage our friends, neighbors and family members in need to access these available resources.

For more information and links to mental health support resources in your area, visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness at www.nami.org or call the NAMI HelpLine at (800)-950-NAMI (6264).

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