

Suicide and older adults: Understanding risk and supporting wellbeing in later life

Suicide is often misunderstood as a concern only for younger people — but in fact, older adults (particularly men over 75), have some of the highest suicide rates in the U.S. Aging can bring meaningful growth and wisdom, but it can also involve challenges like loss, isolation, and physical health changes that may increase emotional distress.

Recognizing risk factors and building in additional support are essential steps toward helping older adults lead connected, purposeful lives.

What increases risk for older adults?

Several factors may raise the risk of suicide in older adults:

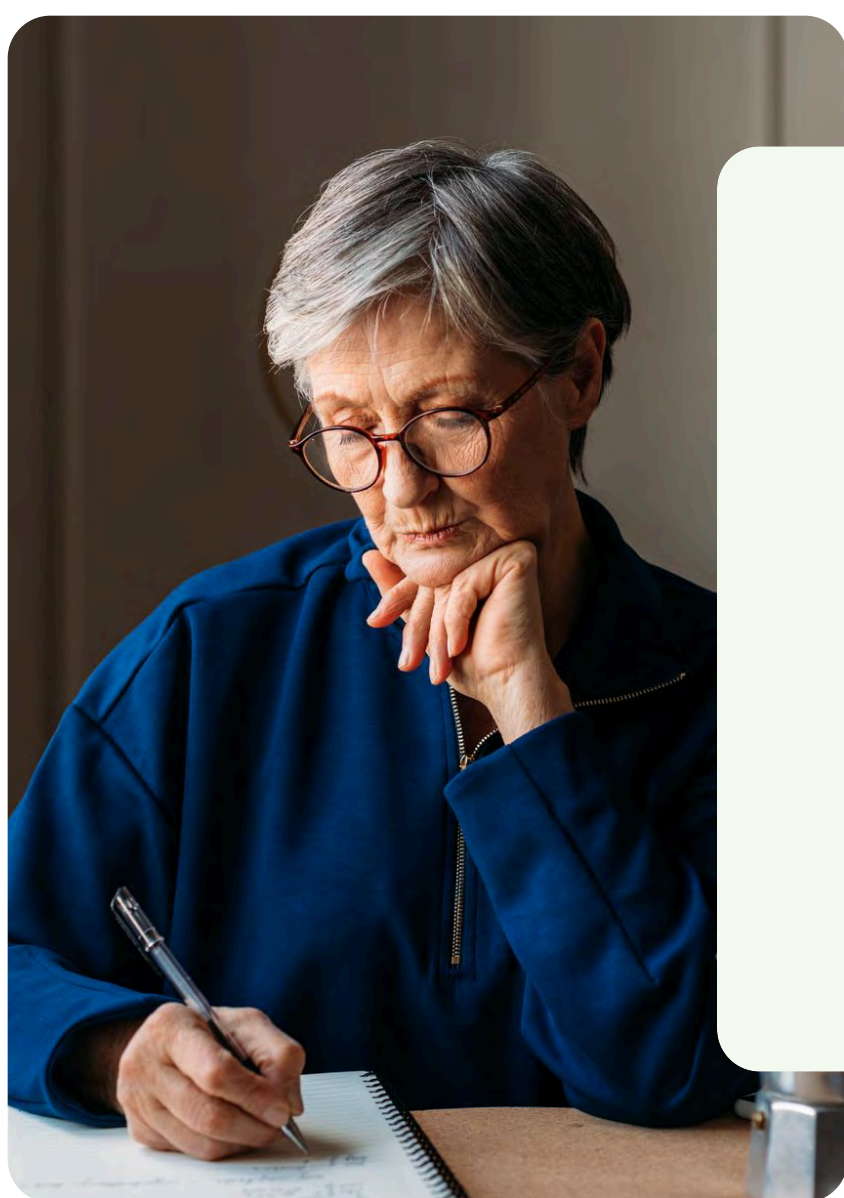
- **Social isolation:** Retirement, bereavement, and physical limitations can lead to loneliness and reduced social interaction.
- **Physical illness and pain:** Chronic illness, disability, or unrelieved pain can cause distress and reduce quality of life.
- **Depression:** Though not a normal part of aging, depression is often underdiagnosed in older adults or misattributed to physical decline.
- **Losses and life transitions:** The loss of a spouse, friends, independence, or identity (e.g., life after retirement) can deeply affect mental health.
- **Reluctance to seek help:** Some older adults may feel stigma around mental healthcare or believe emotional suffering is a natural part of aging.

Statistically, older men — especially white men over 75 — are at the highest risk of suicide among older adults. This may be due in part to social disconnection and lower rates of mental health treatment in this group.

What helps protect older adults?

Hope and connection are powerful antidotes to despair. Older adults are resilient, and many find new meaning in this stage of life. Protective factors are life characteristics that can help make someone more resilient to the types of mental health challenges that can sometimes lead to suicide. These protective factors include:

- **Social connection:** Frequent contact with friends, family, or community groups helps combat loneliness and fosters belonging.
- **Access to health care:** Early screening and treatment for depression, substance use, or cognitive decline can prevent crises.
- **Purpose and engagement:** Staying involved in volunteer work, hobbies, or caregiving can reinforce a sense of meaning and value.
- **Safe environments:** Removing access to lethal means, especially firearms, can save lives in moments of acute distress.
- **Open conversations:** Talking honestly about mental health and aging can reduce stigma and increase willingness to seek help.



Every stage of life deserves support

Suicide is not an inevitable part of aging. When we create communities that value and care for older adults — through connection, healthcare access, and inclusion — we foster environments where people can thrive at every age.

If you or someone you love is struggling, you're not alone:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988
- **SAMHSA's National Helpline:** 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- **Local Area Agencies on Aging:** Find support at Eldercare Locator

Source: [National Council on Aging](#)