



SUICIDE AMONG THE ELDERLY  
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By 2030, all baby boomers will be older than 65. While we may want to think that older adults are happy to be retired and enjoying time with their grandchildren and other family members, these “golden years” may not be so bright for many older adults. The problems faced by older adults can often lead to mental health problems. Yes, mental health is a topic to discuss at all ages. Older adults have the highest rate of suicide of all age groups. According to the [National Council on Aging](#), older adults comprise about 16.8% of the population but make up approximately 22% of suicides.

[Marilyn A. Mendoza, Ph.D.](#), writes in *Psychology Today* that as we age, depression, anxiety, loneliness, substance abuse, isolation, physical illness, pain, loss of ability, financial difficulties, food insecurity, death of a spouse, and even a diagnosis of dementia can create a sense of hopelessness that can lead to suicidal thoughts. Retirement from a meaningful job can create a sense of uselessness. For some who have always been self-sufficient, relying on others can lead to feelings of powerlessness, helplessness and hopelessness. When you factor in undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues that a person has had throughout youth and adulthood, the risk of suicide increases.

In many cases, suicide is preventable. As with younger age groups, older adults will exhibit signs that they may be considering suicide. [Dr. John Santino](#) at the Cleveland Clinic points out that since suicide covers all races, age groups, genders, and ethnic backgrounds the warning signs are not always the same. “Depression in older adults doesn’t always look like it does in younger people,” writes Dr. Santino. “You might think of depression as obvious sadness, always seeming downcast and teary – but in older adults it more often looks like withdrawing or being dismissive.” Some signs to look for are social withdrawal, medical noncompliance, giving away belongings, or changes in appearance. “Individually, these are nothing to worry about but when these warning signs come in combination, they may signify trouble.” Dr. Santino goes on to say that when someone has a preoccupation or wish to die, expresses unbearable physical or emotional pain, feels like a burden, feels empty or hopeless, is overwhelmed by guilt or shame or feels trapped with no way out, it is time for you to step in and do something.

What can you do? First, don’t be afraid to talk about suicide. Asking if a person is considering suicide won’t push the person over the edge. Not talking about suicidal thoughts actually increases the risk of suicide. [Regina Koepp](#), PsyD, ABPP, gives a list of questions to ask an older adult in her article in *Psychology Today*. These questions include:

- *Do you feel as though life is no longer an option for you?*
- *Have you had thoughts about harming yourself?*
- *Are you planning to harm yourself or take your life?*
- *Is there a gun in the house? Or a collection of pills?*
- *Are you often alone?*

Encourage the older adult to see a medical provider to rule out medical causes for suicidal thoughts. Help the person get connected to a mental health professional. [Ann Koegler](#) at Altenheim Resource Services can provide information on local mental health resources. If you are concerned, remove pills, weapons or other means of suicide from the home. **Call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 9-8-8.** Call 9-1-1 for a welfare check if you are concerned about the person’s safety. The important thing is to **DO SOMETHING!**