

# MENTAL WELL-BEING CROSSROAD

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## **Definition**

This CrossRoad will discuss the older adult's and the caregiver's efforts to maintain or achieve what they personally define as good psychological health and is more than the lack of mental illness.

## **Glossary of Terms**

A list of terms you may come across while researching this topic.

## **Search Our Database**

On the Navigating the CrossRoads main page you will find a drop down menu of pre-populated search terms that will bring you to a list of Central Massachusetts agencies and programs that relate to this topic. You may also [CLICK HERE](#) to go to our Guide to Elder Services, an online searchable database, to do more extensive searches or for results in a specific zip code, city/town or Central Massachusetts geographic region. *\*\*If you are unable to find a keyword on the pre-populated list and it consists of two terms, transpose the order of the terms i.e. to search for Geriatric Counseling use the keyword Counseling, Geriatric.*

## **Helpful Links**

A list of outside websites to visit for further information.

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*This information was written with older adults in mind and is meant to provide a general overview of mental health care and options for older adults. The information provided does not discuss every aspect of this topic. This information does not constitute legal nor medical advice. We encourage you to consult with competent professional and/or legal representatives for advice.*

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## **Introduction**

An individual's well-being is a broad concept. It is determined by more than just the presence or lack of physical and mental diagnoses and symptoms. One's overall well-being is a personal understanding of his/her own mental health, physical health, financial state, happiness, and any other influences on his/her total life satisfaction.

Every individual defines mental well-being differently. Therefore, the tools used to work towards and maintain what each of us defines as good psychological health will be unique. Mental well-being can drastically affect overall health including physical health. Working on your mental well-being should be an ongoing, active process. It is important to consciously check in on the state of your own well-being regularly, even though this may be challenging. Depending on the situations that you find yourself in your mental well-being may change from minute to minute, hour to hour or day to day. Your mental well-being can be seriously influenced by those individuals around you. This can be overwhelmingly true for older adults and caregivers who are greatly involved in one another's lives. You need to gain an understanding of your own personal limits so you can recognize when situations are negatively affecting your mental well-being. Knowing these limits will assist you to determine when you need to reach out and ask for help. There also needs to be honest open discussions between the older adult, the caregiver, and everyone else on the CareTeam about their own personal needs and limits. Communicating that you have reached your limit with those around you is essential. You may seek help from a variety of sources including family, friends, and professionals both on and off the CareTeam. There are numerous types of mental health professionals that you may choose to speak with who will assist you in working towards and maintaining your desired state of mental well-being. Mental illnesses are common and it is a sign of strength, rather than weakness, to seek help. Seeking professional help for a mental illness is just as important as it is for a physical illness.

The exact causes of mental illnesses are not known but it is not your fault and it is nothing to be ashamed of. Mental illnesses can be caused by a number of different factors and are often thought to be caused by a combination of factors. They are thought to be caused by chemical disorders in the brain, environmental factors, genetic traits, biological factors and stress filled personal life situations. Professionals have differing opinions about how much each of these factors play into mental illnesses and therefore their recommended treatments might be different. It is important to find a professional or a combination of professionals with whom you feel comfortable. The mental well-being of you and the older adult that you are caring for is very important to your health and your caregiving relationship.

## **Depression**

Occasional sadness is a normal part of everyone's life but when these feelings begin to seriously interfere with your ability to handle even the most basic of daily tasks; this could be a sign of depression. Depression is a common, serious illness that affects people of all ages. Feelings of sadness or lack of interest in normal activities that is severe, lasts a couple of weeks, or interferes with daily life could all be signs of depression. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the National Institute of Mental Health to learn more about the symptoms of depression. When an individual is suffering from depression, everyone in their life may be negatively affected. Caregivers may find it extremely challenging to help an older adult who is experiencing depression. Similarly, when the caregiver is experiencing depression, the older adult who they are caring for is not immune to the potential negative effects. If either of you are experiencing signs of depression it is important to seek professional help. Depression can often be overlooked by medical professionals and even family and friends, so be aware of the signs and talk to a mental health professional about any concerns. It may be easiest to begin a conversation about depression with a primary care physician (PCP). However, the PCP may not have specialized training in mental health and you may be well advised to seek out professionals with mental health expertise. A mental health professional can diagnose depression

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and recommend several different treatment options including psychotherapy, medication etc. Treatment options available throughout your community may occur in an individual or group setting.

## **Anxiety Disorders**

Anxiety disorders are another common, serious mental condition that can affect anyone, at any age. Many different types of anxiety disorders exist including, obsessive compulsive disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, social anxiety disorder, and panic disorder. Being nervous or anxious sometimes is normal, especially under certain conditions. However, if these feelings are frequent, occur without a good reason, or interfere with normal life, they could be signs of an anxiety disorder. It is important to watch for signs and symptoms of an anxiety disorder in the older adult as well as in the caregiver and other members of the CareTeam. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the Anxiety and Depression Association of America website to learn more about the different types of anxiety disorders and their signs and symptoms. An individual's relationships may be negatively affected when they are suffering from an anxiety disorder. This is especially true when the individual is a caregiver or an older adult being cared for. Much like depression these disorders are often mistaken for normal responses to stressful situations and are overlooked. These disorders are treatable and a mental health professional can diagnose and suggest treatment options. Ignoring an anxiety disorder can have a negative impact on the mental and physical health of the caregiver and the older adult.

## **Seeking Professional Help**

Some stress, anxiety and sadness are normal for caregivers and older adults, but if these feelings become overwhelming, you should talk to a mental health professional. Because of the stress associated with these roles anxiety and depression are common among caregivers and older adults. Seeking professional help can assist you in working towards positive mental well-being which will strengthen your caregiving relationship. Getting help for a mental illness is just as essential as getting help for a physical illness. You should seek professional help if you or the older adult experiences any of these symptoms for two weeks or longer:

- Feelings of worthlessness
- A change in sleeping habits, either sleeping more or less than usual or having reoccurring nightmares or flashbacks
- A change in eating habits, either overeating or a lack of an appetite that leads to weight gain or loss
- Feelings of guilt (when it is not warranted)
- Lack of energy or constant weariness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Lack of self-esteem
- Crying more than usual
- Less attention to appearance and a lack of caring about appearance
- Anger and/or lashing out
- Feelings of constant worry
- Avoiding social situations for fear of judgment
- Feeling panicky or frightened for no rational reason
- Feeling overly stressed

If you or the older adult have any concerns regarding any of the above signs and symptoms speak with a mental health or medical professional who can determine if treatment is needed. Mental health

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conditions are real and should not be ignored because they can take a serious toll on your mental and physical health.

## **Treatments For Mental Illnesses**

There are many treatments available for mental illnesses. A mental health professional can help determine which treatment(s) is the best option for you or the older adult. This may depend on the diagnosis, the severity, and current circumstances. Make sure that the individual seeking assistance feels comfortable with the treatments suggested. Talking to multiple medical and mental health professionals about different options can also be a good idea. Make sure that each professional knows about any treatment methods already being used before starting a new one. Sometimes only one treatment is used, but it is common for multiple treatment methods to be used together.

Two common treatments for mental illnesses are medications and psychotherapy (talk therapy). There are a wide range of medications that can be prescribed by a medical or mental health professional to reduce the symptoms of a mental illness. Remember, prescription medications can be harmful if they're not used properly. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our Medical CrossRoads for more information. Psychotherapy is another common way to treat mental illnesses and involves talking to a medical or mental health professional about the illness, related concerns, thoughts, feelings, etc. This therapy helps the individual address and manage their unhealthy thoughts and behaviors. Psychotherapy also provides individuals with the needed strategies to help them manage their symptoms. There are different types of psychotherapy such as cognitive behavioral therapy and interpersonal therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps an individual focus on current problems and find solutions with the active help of a mental health professional. Interpersonal therapy works to identify and improve how an individual communicates with others. A medical or mental health professional and an individual can determine which type is best for them. Psychotherapy and medication treatment options are often used together.

## **Abuse Of An Older Adult (Elder Abuse)**

Elder abuse, neglect and self-neglect are very serious problems that are often not addressed or reported. There are many different ways an older adult can be abused or neglected by the people in his/her life. The older adult may be abused or neglected by a member of the CareTeam, by a stranger, such as a telemarketer, or by him/herself. There are warning signs associated with each type of abuse, if you or anyone else who cares for the older adult sees signs that he/she may be the victim of abuse or neglect, report it to the Massachusetts Elder Abuse Hotline at 1-800-922-2275 or 1-800-872-0166 (TTY/TDD). If the older adult is in immediate danger and it is an emergency situation, call 911. Some members of the CareTeam or in the community may be required by law to report abuse if they are aware of it. Mandatory reporters include police officers, nurses, doctors, social workers, firefighters, EMTs, and other professionals. Elder abuse can take many different forms, all of which harm the older adult and should be reported immediately. Although it may be hard to understand, the older adult has the right to refuse help or services in the event of a report of abuse. Unless the older adult is unable to understand the consequences of refusing services or help, it is his/her right as an adult to deny help. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our Personal & Home Safety CrossRoad for more information on Elder Abuse.

## **Mental Well-Being Of The Caregiver**

As a caregiver, you can expect to experience a range of emotions throughout your caregiving journey. At different times, you may feel joyful, frustrated, satisfied, worried, guilty, sad, drained, hopeful, excited, helpless, or lonely. It is common for caregivers to experience some negative emotions in response to coping with the demands of caregiving. These emotions could be influenced by

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transitions in the older adult's condition such as when their needs change or their health status declines. This may cause you to feel depressed or anxious. If these feelings become overwhelming they may require treatment. Depression and anxiety are both treatable conditions. If you or someone close to you is concerned about your emotional well-being, you should consider seeking out an evaluation of your symptoms.

You should be mindful of how you tend to deal with stressful situations, since caregiving carries with it many burdens and therefore can be a very difficult and stressful job. Your normal response to cope with the daily stressors of life may be to reasonably use prescribed or non-prescribed drugs and/or alcohol. However, if you find that your usage of these substances is escalating to deal with increased stressful situations, and it is negatively affecting your life, you may need to seek outside help. Be mindful that this could also be true for the older adult. Being addicted to alcohol, prescription drugs, or illegal drugs harms one's physical and mental health severely. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our Medical CrossRoad for more information on Substance Abuse.

Many caregivers find themselves in need of support. Because your role of caregiver can be all encompassing you need to remember to take time for yourself. This is such a simple concept that is often suggested but proves extremely difficult to accomplish. This could mean carving out a few minutes for leisure activity or seeking out professional mental health support. Your primary care physician, a local health clinic, or a mental health professional, like a social worker, counselor or psychologist, will be able to offer you guidance or direct you to someone who can help.

## Stress

Caregiving can be very challenging and the burden placed on you can lead to high levels of stress. Feeling some stress as a result of caregiving is normal but you need to recognize when you are close to your limit and need to minimize your stress. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the American Psychological Association for the warning signs of stress. It is harder for you to care for the older adult if you are feeling a great amount of stress. Stress can also affect your ability to make sound decisions for both yourself and the older adult. High levels of stress can be harmful to you both physically and mentally. Stress can lead to more serious conditions such as anxiety, depression, heart disease or hypertension. Studies have shown that caregivers are more likely to suffer negative health outcomes and earlier death than their non-caregiving peers. In order to continue to best care for the older adult you must maintain your physical and mental health. One way to do this is to reduce your stress. Some ways to reduce stress are:

- Ask for help when you need it, whether it is from a friend, family member, CareTeam member, or a community program such as a caregiver support program. ***You don't have to go it alone!***
- Be flexible in your role as a caregiver. What works today may not work tomorrow, so be open to change.
- Look into community resources that can help you as the caregiver, or provide direct care to the older adult. Tapping into any such resource will ultimately be helping both of you no matter who is directly receiving the service. You each may be eligible for more services than you realize, so learn about what is available.
- Make sure you are getting enough sleep every night. If the older adult needs help during the night that prevents you from sleeping, then try taking naps during the day or consider getting help to care for him/her during the night. There are programs that offer overnight adult day care, which are for older adults who would benefit from activities or socialization during the night.
- Exercise regularly to stay healthy and relive stress. This may include taking the stairs instead of the elevator, parking further away in the parking lot, or taking a short walk during your lunch break. Also including the older adult in light physical activity can be a great way to keep you both healthy and engaged.

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- Eat healthy foods in appropriate amounts. This can be difficult if caregiving leaves little time for shopping and cooking so incorporating healthy options whenever possible is important for both of you.
- Do not let your caregiving role cut you off from your social life. Keep up your relationships with your friends and family members. Even if you cannot spend as much time with your friends or family as you did before, a quick phone call or short visit will still be beneficial.
- Try to stay positive about the situation, no matter how difficult it may seem. Keeping your sense of humor and staying present in the moment are ways to continue to make this stressful situation feel more manageable.
- Take a break. Sometimes taking a break, whether it is going for a walk alone or going on a vacation with friends, can recharge you and reduce your stress. In order to care for the older adult in your absence you may rely on respite programs. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our Respite CrossRoad for more information.
- Keep a realistic outlook about what you have control over and what you do not. Try not to worry about the things you cannot control and focus on what you can control.
- Set boundaries with the older adult you are caring for and other members of the CareTeam. Make your limits clear and do not take on more than you can handle. It is okay to say “No”.
- Let the older adult do the tasks that he/she is capable of doing. It is better for both of you if you encourage him/her to be as independent as possible.
- Practice stress management and relaxation techniques like deep breathing, yoga or meditation.
- Understand the condition of the older adult. If he/she is expected to worsen, prepare yourself and remember that it is not your fault. Being aware of what to expect in the future and having a plan in place will help to reduce stress.
- Talk about your feelings with friends, relatives, CareTeam members, or a support group. Keeping your feelings and emotions to yourself can increase your stress levels. Writing them down in a journal is another way to express your emotions.
- Join a support group. There are a variety of types of support groups including online, in-person, or telephone groups. Some support groups are peer led while others are facilitated by a professional. Groups can also be disease specific, educational or involve the older adult. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our Caregiver Hub for more information on caregiver support. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our website for upcoming support groups and chat sessions.

### **Burnout And Exhaustion**

Taking care of an older adult can be a tiring and frustrating task. Challenges usually increase as the caregiving responsibilities grow. Being burnt out means that you feel as though you have hit your limit with how much you can handle. You may feel frustrated and resent the older adult for the care that he/she needs from you. If you often feel exhausted, even if you are getting enough sleep, this may be another sign that you need help taking care of the older adult. Burnout and exhaustion are harmful to your well-being and can negatively affect the care that you provide. It may lead to you getting frustrated more easily, losing your temper or feeling like you want to give up. If you are feeling exhausted or burnt out from your role, you may need to seek help from others on the CareTeam or a mental health professional.

### **Balancing Caregiving And Working**

Many caregivers also have a job that they have to balance with their caregiving role. Balancing both roles can be very challenging, especially if the job and caregiving role are demanding. Often caregivers cannot give up their job to take care of the older adult full time. It can be physically and mentally exhausting to do both, but there may be ways to make it easier. Talk to your employer about the situation; there might be options or resources at your workplace to help you balance work and caregiving. Some companies have Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide support to

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employees with personal challenges such as caregiving or substance abuse. If your employer does not have an EAP, the Human Resources department may be able to help you.

If your employer is aware of your caregiving role they may be more understanding of your needs. You might be able to arrange a flexible work schedule such as working the same number of hours but on a different schedule, working from home or switching shifts to accommodate your schedule. Although your employer may be willing to help, remember that you still have to fulfill your responsibilities as an employee.

If a flexible schedule is not an option or the older adult requires more care, you may be eligible for unpaid time off from work. The Family and Medical Leave Act allows eligible workers to take twelve weeks of unpaid leave to care for an immediate family member who has a serious health condition. Learn about company policies regarding caregiver leave from the Human Resources department. If this is not an option for you, switching from full time to part time is another way to have more time for your caregiving role. You may feel forced to make the decision to leave the workforce if these other options do not allow you to maintain your caregiving role.

### **Balancing Caregiving And Relationships (Spouse, Children, Friends, Siblings etc)**

Maintaining relationships while caregiving may be hard, but it is very important for your mental well-being. Communicating well with friends and family should be one of your main priorities in order to keep these relationships strong. If you are having a hard time, tell them about it. If something they are doing (or not doing) is bothering you, mention it. Make sure that they feel comfortable talking to you about their problems and frustrations as well. Talking about the current caregiving situation can help you avoid miscommunications and unspoken resentment. They may understand your frustrations better than other people and be able to help you think of solutions. You can also vent to them or use them as a sounding board for ideas.

While you are caregiving keep up your normal activities with friends and family as best you can. Try to continue celebrating holidays, getting together regularly, and participating in activities that you enjoy. Your friends and relatives are one of the many valuable resources you have available to help you care for the older adult. Although they can be a great asset to you in your caregiving role, make sure your conversations do not become entirely focused on the older adult's caregiving needs. In addition to obtaining help from those individuals close to you getting outside assistance may offer you more freedom. Be careful not to ask too much of any one of your friends and/or family member so that you do not jeopardize any of the relationships. Also keep in mind that even if you ask these individuals to help they may not be capable or willing to assist you with the care of the older adult.

## **Mental Well-Being Of The Older Adult**

It is important for the CareTeam to pay attention to the mental health and well-being of the older adult. Life changes are part of the aging process and can be difficult for the older adult to deal with. In some cases, this may lead to depression. Depression is more common among older adults than younger people, but it is treatable. It is normal for older adults to have bad moods and be sad sometimes, especially if they have just experienced a loss or a major life change. If these feelings persist it might be a sign of depression and should be evaluated by a medical or mental health professional. It can be hard for a medical professional to notice the signs of mental illnesses in their patients because they do not spend a great deal of time with them. Because of this, it is often a family member or friend who observes a change in behavior in the older adult that may be of concern. Noticing signs and symptoms and mentioning them to a medical professional is a good way to ensure that the older adult receives help. Depression can have many negative consequences for the older adult. It can lead to dangerous physical health problems, such as heart disease, if left untreated. Ongoing depression can also lead to suicide. Research has shown that adults aged 65 and over in the United States have a higher death rate due to suicide than any other age group. Keep in mind that if the

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older adult struggled with depression in their younger years they are more likely to experience it again. If you are concerned that the older adult you are caring for may be experiencing depression discuss this with members of the CareTeam and medical professionals. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the National Institute of Mental Health for more information on the signs and symptoms of depression.

Sometimes older adults turn to drugs and alcohol as a way of coping with the struggles of getting older. Other times, they have been struggling with substance abuse for years. The affects of drugs and alcohol on older adults is stronger than on younger people. It is important to look for signs of substance abuse in the older adult and get them professional help if there is a problem. [CLICK HERE](#) to visit our Medical CrossRoad for more information on Substance Abuse.

### **Common Causes Of Sadness And Grief In Older Adults**

- Feeling alone or isolated
- Feeling helpless or useless
- Loss of independence
- Retiring or leaving the work force
- Moving out of their home or relocating
- Other major transitions such as no longer being able to drive
- The death of a spouse, friends, or other close family member such as a sibling
- A decline in health or a new diagnosis including a loss of physical and mental abilities and physical pain
- Financial concerns

### **Tips For The Older Adult's Mental Health**

- Encourage the older adult to be as independent as possible.
- Continue to keep the older adult engaged in activities that they enjoy.
- Socializing is important. The older adult can engage in community activities including volunteering, participating in religious activities, going to a senior center or getting a part time job. The older adult can also attend adult day care. Visits from family and friends can help boost his/her spirits as well.
- Communicate often to ensure that the older adult is not feeling stressed or overwhelmed due to their current medical, psychological, social and financial circumstances. Sometimes they may need to vent or have someone to listen to their concerns.
- Look for warning signs of mental illnesses and seek professional help.
- There are many disease oriented support groups available. If the older adult is having trouble dealing with a specific disease, there may be a support group specific to people with that disease that could help him/her cope. The disease specific support groups can be helpful for both older adults and caregivers.

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