

# Older adults and suicide

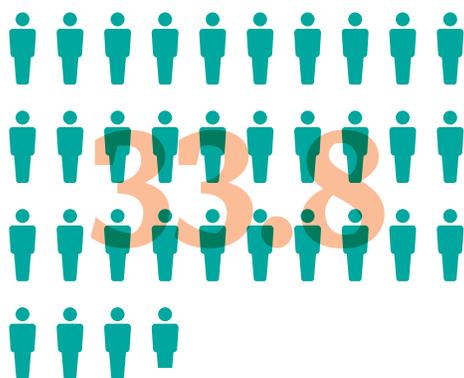
People 65 years and older, especially men, have a high risk of suicide. As Canada's largest population group, the baby boomers, approach the plus 65 age range, we may see an increase in suicide in years to come (Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH), 2009; Van Orden & Deming, 2017).

## SUICIDE RATES (PER 100,000):

### MEN OVER 65



### MEN OVER 90



(Statistics Canada, 2017).

## SUICIDE ATTEMPTS

Older males die by suicide more often than any other group because they use more lethal means when attempting suicide.



(O'Dwyer & De Leo, 2016; CCSMH, 2009; Marcus, 1996).

## Why are older adults at risk?

There are a few factors that put older adults at risk of suicide, factors that can put strain on one's mental health and potentially lead to thoughts of suicide:

- Experiences of loss such as loss of health, loved ones, physical mobility and independence
- Major life changes such as retirement, change in financial status, a transition into care facilities
- Fewer relationships and connections as loved ones have passed away; also, older adults are more likely to live alone
- Feeling of being a burden to loved ones
- Chronic illness and pain (Joiner, 2005; Jahn & Cukrowicz, 2011; Heisel & Links, 2005)

## What can reduce risk?

- Good physical and mental health
- Strong, supportive relationships with friends and family
- Being willing and able to ask for help when it's needed
- Having a meaning and purpose in life
- Not having access to lethal means such as guns or potentially deadly medications (Heisel & Duberstein, 2016; Lapierre et al., 2016; Marty et al., 2010; Van Orden & Deming, 2017; CCSMH, 2009).

## Warning signs

Warning signs in older adults can be difficult to identify, as some changes in behaviour can be the result of changes as one gets older. For example, if someone is going out less frequently with friends, this could be seen as someone isolating themselves, when in reality they may be having mobility issues.

Any significant change in behaviour or mood is a warning sign that someone may be thinking about suicide, for example:

- Losing interest in a previously enjoyed hobby or activity
- Disconnecting from friends or family (not calling as much, not going out)
- Change in sleeping or eating patterns

Statements of hopelessness can also be a warning sign, or talk of being a burden:

- *“I don’t want to have to rely on others for help... I’ve already become such a burden”*

- *“I can’t do many of the things I used to, including work. I feel like I have no purpose in life”*

If you notice any of the following signs, get the person help immediately – call 9-1-1 or your local crisis centre:

- Threatening to hurt or kill themselves
- Talking or writing about dying or suicide
- Seeking out ways to kill themselves (American Association of Suicidology, 2017).



## What can we all do to help reduce suicide among older adults?

If someone you know is exhibiting warning signs, have an open, non-judgmental conversation with them.

You can start the conversation by mentioning your concerns, *“I haven’t seen you around the swimming pool lately, how are you doing?”* or, *“I notice you have been a bit stressed these past couple weeks. Are you okay?”* Listen to them, be there for them. You don’t have to offer solutions. If the person responds with statements of hopelessness or being a burden, ask them about those feelings. Then, ask them directly,

*“Are you thinking about killing yourself?”*

It is not common for older adults to directly access mental health services (Heisel, 2016). If an older person you know might be experiencing mental health concerns, encourage them and offer to go with them to find mental health supports (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2010).

## What can older adults do to stay mentally healthy?

1

### MAINTAIN PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

This could be as simple as eating right and exercising a little bit every day.

2

### HAVE FUN AND DO WHAT YOU LOVE TO DO!

Make time for enjoyable activities or hobbies.

3

### PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS

Call, text, or visit friends and family, be sure to stay in touch! Take part in a class or another kind of group activity, at a club or senior’s centre.

4

### INCLUDE ACTIVITIES WITH PURPOSE AND MEANING INTO DAILY LIFE

Volunteer to support friends or peers in your community.

5

### ASK FOR HELP WHEN IT IS NEEDED!

When struggling to cope with life, tell a loved one or call the local crisis line, which you can find at [suicideprevention.ca/need-help/](https://suicideprevention.ca/need-help/)



If you are in crisis, call 211 or your local crisis line. First Nations people and Inuit can also call 1.855.242.3310

[hopeforwellness.ca](https://hopeforwellness.ca)  
[suicideprevention.ca/need-help](https://suicideprevention.ca/need-help)

VISIT [SUICIDEINFO.CA](https://SUICIDEINFO.CA) FOR MORE RESOURCES



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### ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

**Anyone** can learn to identify someone at risk of suicide and get them help.

#### Call us.

We are the Centre for Suicide Prevention. For 35+ years we've been equipping Canadians with knowledge and skills to respond to people at risk of suicide. We can equip you too. We educate for life.

### ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is a catalyst for improving the mental health system and changing the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians around mental health issues.



If you are in crisis, call 211 or your local crisis line. First Nations people and Inuit can also call 1.855.242.3310

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