

Aging Considerations: Stress and Change

Most adults face predictable and challenging situations in later life. These situations usually come from change. Change can be stressful, even if it is for the good. Older adults tend to experience a lot of change – some expected (loss of friends to death) and some over which people have no control (loss of the ability to drive). When stressors multiply, people are more vulnerable to mental health problems.

Common age related changes and challenges that are associated with stress include:

- retirement
- increased leisure or unstructured time
- health changes
- reliance on others
- social adjustments
- financial changes
- loss of loved ones
- pain or disability
- relocation or housing changes
- negotiating new systems (i.e. health care benefits)
- medication use
- caregiving for another person
- sensory decline (hearing, vision)
- mobility restrictions
- change in appearance
- development of new relationships
- cultural emphasis on the value of youth

The two stress themes most commonly associated with mental health disorders in later life are loss and social isolation. Individual factors that contribute to negative stress responses include: persistent stress, lack of support, resistance to change in circumstances and routine, and a negative outlook on life. Stress affects our bodies, our minds and our behaviors. People under a lot of stress may feel overwhelmed, anxious, worried, fearful, angry, irritable, helpless or depressed.

Physical signs of stress may include:

- fatigue
- headache
- cold hands and feet
- changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- back pain

What You Need to Know...



- stomach problems

If any of these symptoms last more than a few weeks, it is important to talk to a doctor or other health care professional. Prolonged stress interferes with the body's ability to fight illness and may result in brain changes that cause mental illness.

With preparation, people can handle stress more constructively. Diet and exercise are important factors in supporting the mind and body at any time. Positive thinking is another powerful tool to combat the negative effects of stress. Maintaining good mental health includes planning and practices for handling stress and developing positive coping skills.

For more information, call Mental Health America of Wisconsin at (414) 276-3122 or visit us on the web at www.mhawisconsin.org.

www.mhawisconsin.org