Managing Anxiety in Seniors

We all recognize that dreaded familiar feeling of anxiety when it wakes us up in the middle of the night or strikes for no apparent reason during the day. Anxiety manifests itself uniquely in each individual. For some, anxiety is apparent in sweating; others struggle with headaches or gastrointestinal problems; and finally, for some, anxiety occurs in conjunction with chest pains. No matter how any of us feel anxiety, we can agree that it can be an overwhelming emotion that leaves us feeling helpless. In senior adults, anxiety can be completely incapacitating, leaving them feeling alone and isolated from friends and society.

The most common form of anxiety that seniors struggle with is phobia, which is when a person is fearful of particular places or events and seeks to avoid this situation at all costs. Other seniors may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder, both of which have specific triggers that cause the onset of anxiety. Regardless of the type of anxiety that some older adults experience, there are several key strategies that can help individuals overcome these stressful emotions.

The first step is to acknowledge the worry and address the fears that the older adult shares; yet, do so in an encouraging manner with focus not on the anxiety issue, but rather on the items that can be managed or controlled. Encourage a senior adult to talk with a family member, friend or spiritual mentor to ease the burden of his or her anxiety. Exercise, even in its simplest form, can be a tremendous tool to manage anxiety. Remind seniors to turn off the news and listen to or watch uplifting programs that relieve stress instead of inducing stress. Finally, seniors can direct attention to meditation, prayer or deep breathing exercises to induce relaxation.

As always, be sure to consult your medical professional for advice. In some cases, prescription medication or therapy strategies may be necessary to help manage anxiety.

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