Encourage your senior loved one to give therapy a try

Here’s how you can urge your older loved one to get the care they need, according to experts.

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In recent years, more Americans have begun to understand the important role mental health plays in their lives. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), just over 19% of adults received some form of mental health treatment in 2019, and many mental health care providers report major increases in requests for care throughout the pandemic. Access to quality mental health care goes a long way towards improving a person’s emotional well-being. “Having someone who you’re not emotionally attached to, [in a space] where you can vent and hear yourself out loud, and you don’t have to feel so guarded about what you say — that helps a lot,” says Mindy Crouch, a licensed clinical social worker specializing in geriatric therapy in Omaha, Nebraska. Despite the positives, many aging parents and family members who might benefit from seeing a therapist are still reluctant to go. Many adult children know all too well how difficult it can be to convince these loved ones to make their mental health a priority and to assure them that they can do so without facing judgment or shame, losing their right to privacy or sacrificing their personal boundaries. If you’re struggling to convince a parent or older loved one to take the first step and give therapy a try, here’s how to guide and encourage them to get the care they need.

“A therapist’s job is to tell you what you need to hear. And, as helpful as our family and friends may be, there are also things that you just don’t want to share with them.”— MINDY CROUCH, A LICENSED CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER SPECIALIZING IN GERIATRIC THERAPY

Reasons to go to therapy

When many people think about reasons to seek therapy, the first things that come to mind are depression, anxiety and other mental health struggles. While these are important conditions to discuss with a mental health care provider, they aren’t the only reasons why it’s a good idea to start working with a therapist. “Everyone deserves someone objective to talk to,” Crouch says. “Family and friends are sometimes forced to tell you what you want to hear. A therapist’s job is to tell you what you need to hear. And, as helpful as our family and friends may be, there are also things that you just don’t want to share with them or burden them with.” For their patients, therapists can offer:

- A safe space to vent.
- A chance to learn new coping skills.
- An outlet for stress.
- Help working through family or relationship conflicts.
- Support with big transitions, such as moving or changes in health status.
- An opportunity to improve their overall mental wellness and self-esteem.
Of course, there are acute mental health issues that require treatment from a professional. Due to COVID-19, many people are dealing with feelings of isolation, loneliness and grief. It's important to seek help for your parent if you notice ongoing changes in their behavior or daily routines, such as:

- Sleeping more or less than usual.
- Eating more or less than usual.
- Lack of interest in normal activities.
- Social withdrawal.
- Lethargy, especially if they were formerly active.
- Persistent anxiety, sadness or hopelessness.

“If these problems persist for at least for two weeks or more, that’s a sign that there could be clinical issues,” says Dr. Deepan Chatterjee, a licensed clinical psychologist and geriatric mental health expert who practices in Maryland.

**How to encourage a senior loved one to care for their mental health**

Though therapy has grown in popularity, mental health care is still stigmatized, and it can be especially uncomfortable for those who came of age when seeking treatment for mental health problems was less socially acceptable. “Many of our older relatives grew up in a different time with institutionalization or very negative societal attitudes towards mental health care,” Crouch says. “We obviously know a lot more about mental health now, but still, if someone diagnoses them with depression or some other mental health issue, they can feel like they have done something wrong.” Stigma isn’t the only thing standing in your parent’s or loved one’s way. They may also have concerns about:

- Protecting their privacy.
- What will be required of them if they agree to seek therapy.
- Revisiting past hurts or trauma.
- Whether they’ll be judged by family or friends.
- Whether therapy will actually benefit them.

“Sometimes people will say things like, ‘Oh, my mother is 85. Nothing is going to change now.’ I completely disagree with that,” Chatterjee says. “Many mental health issues are very treatable with therapy and with medications, no matter what your age is.” If your parent or loved one needs reassurance, here’s how to address some of the most common concerns they might have.

**Explain that therapy doesn’t have to last forever.**

“They don’t have to sign on for 12 sessions or commit to anything long term," Crouch says. “They can try it once, work through one issue, then maybe work through the next issue, and if they feel that's good, then they can stop at any time.”

**Tell them what happens in therapy, stays in therapy.**

“Therapy is a very protected field,” Crouch says. “Therapists will not talk to anyone except the patient or identify themselves to anyone as a provider for a patient without consent for release of information. We’re there for the client and the client only, unless the client wants to bring in other people.”

**Let them know therapy doesn’t mean dwelling on the past.**

Different therapists take different approaches, Crouch says, but patients don’t have to dig deep into their family history or past issues if that's not what they want out of their therapy experience. “I focus on the here and the now, what you’re thinking, how it affects your emotions and what can we do behaviorally to change that,” she explains. “Just start with your current situation and see how it goes.”

**Remind them there is nothing wrong with needing help.**

Even if they agree to see a therapist, they may still feel shame about going or worry that they’ve failed in some way. You can’t prevent that, but you can help normalize their feelings and emotions about going to therapy, Crouch says. “Tell them, ‘You did nothing wrong. It’s just dealing with life, and sometimes we need extra support to help us get through tough situations,’” she adds.
Tell them therapy is a form of self-care, and they deserve to feel good. Seeing a therapist can help people feel better prepared to handle the stressors of life and more empowered in their ability to make decisions and maintain healthy relationships. “At my practice, our mission statement is to help people age with dignity and grace and to increase their quality of life,” Crouch says. “Everyone deserves quality of life.”

How to help your older loved one connect with a therapist.
There are many kinds of mental health providers. In most cases, Chatterjee says, a therapist, counselor or licensed clinical social worker is the right person to see. “If it’s a milder form of depression, a stress-related issue, something that’s situational or adjustment-related, like coping with a divorce or family problem, they should be able to help,” he explains.

The best ways to find a therapist in your area include:

• Requesting “in-network” recommendations from your parent’s health insurance company.
• Asking your own therapist to recommend someone with experience in geriatric therapy or psychology.
• Getting your parent’s permission to ask trusted friends or family members for recommendations.
• Using a free online directory, such as Psychology Today or Good Therapy. If your parent would feel more comfortable with a provider of color, try Therapy for Black Girls, Therapy Den or Latinx Therapy.

Psychologists and psychiatrists are also an option for mental health care, but Chatterjee says these providers typically treat more complex mental health problems, such as major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, phobias and psychosis. If you aren’t sure if your parent or loved one needs more advanced care, Crouch says a therapist can help you make that determination. “We would definitely be able to help with finding resources or referrals, as well as seeing if there’s something more going on, like dementia or depression,” she says.

“If you’ve tried one therapist, and it didn’t work, that doesn’t mean therapy doesn’t work. It never hurts to try because it doesn’t matter what age you are, your emotions are the same.” — MINDY CROUCH

How to tell if a therapist is a good match.
Most clinicians will offer an initial consultation via telehealth or an in-person appointment. The consultation is when your loved one can get to know the provider and see how their personalities mesh. “They have to feel comfortable with the person,” Chatterjee says. “If they can’t talk openly and without hesitation, or if they feel like there’s something holding them back, that’s a sign that it’s not going to be a good therapeutic relationship.” If your parent doesn’t want to see a certain provider again, they can and should feel comfortable communicating that. “Therapists know that it’s about a personality match,” says Crouch. “I know not everyone is going to like me, and it’s perfectly OK. I would recommend that they be open with the therapist and say they don’t think it’s a match because maybe we can recommend someone else who is a better fit.” Most importantly, she adds, your parent should know that the right provider is out there, and that they are deserving of quality care that makes them feel safe, understood and respected. “If you’ve tried one therapist and it didn’t work, that doesn’t mean therapy doesn’t work,” she says. “It never hurts to try because it doesn’t matter what age you are, your emotions are the same.”

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