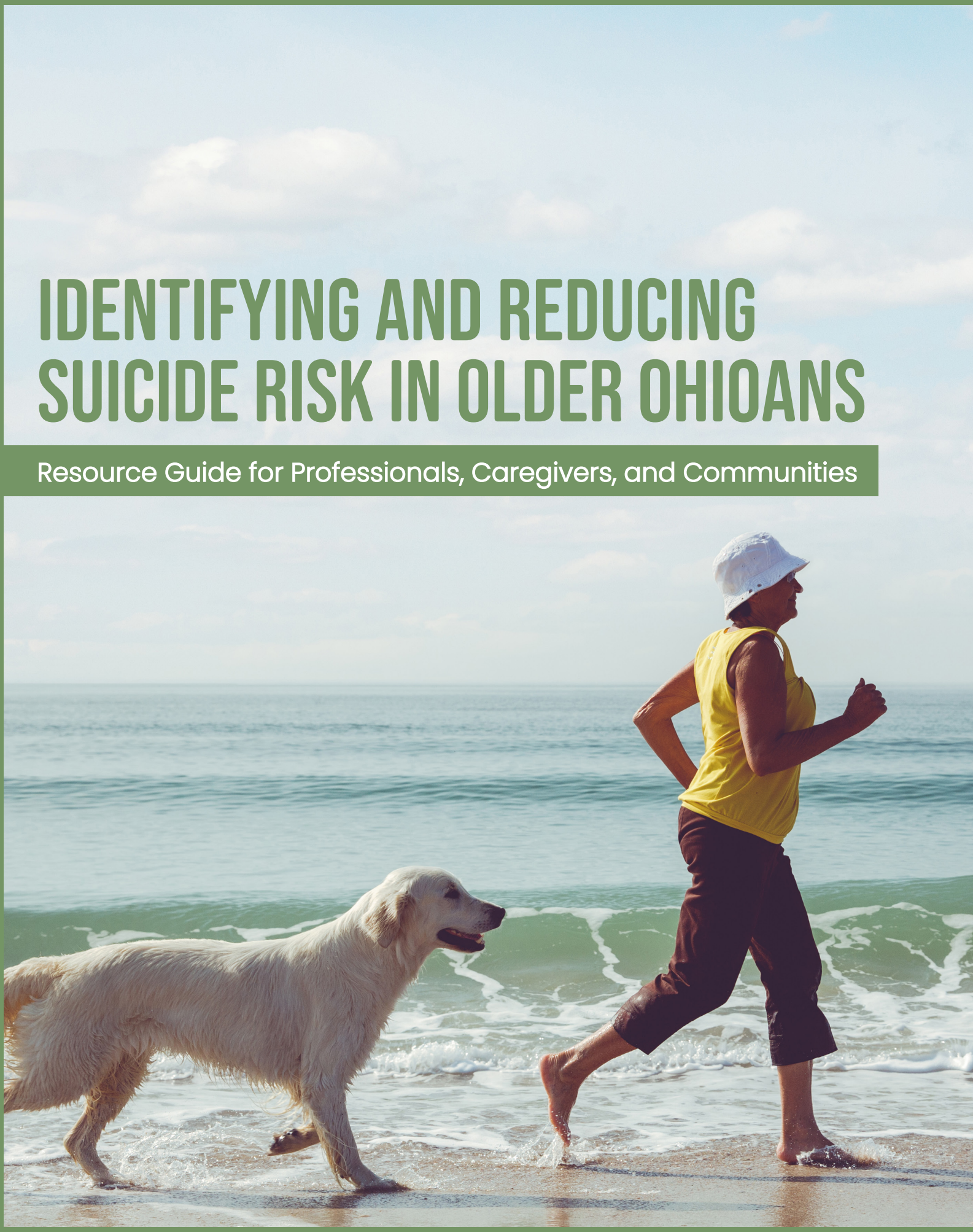
IDENTIFYING AND REDUCING SUICIDE RISK IN OLDER OHIOANS

Resource Guide for Professionals, Caregivers, and Communities





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HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit was developed to help professionals, caregivers, and communities across Ohio better understand and respond to suicide risks among older adults. It's structured around three key elements:

1. **What we learned from data, research, and listening sessions**
2. **What we can do using practical, evidence-based strategies**
3. **Where to find help through trusted resources**

Each section highlights critical concerns affecting older Ohioans, strategies that can be integrated into existing workflows or caregiving routines, and resources that support action. Healthcare professionals, community workers, senior-service providers, home health aides, caregivers, and aging-services staff are encouraged to review these resources and collaborate to develop strategies that focus on early detection, prevention, and compassionate support for older adults at risk for suicide.



Suicide prevention among older adults requires coordination across healthcare, aging services, families, and communities. This toolkit can be used in a variety of ways:

- As a training resource for staff or volunteers
- As a reference during safety planning
- As a framework for community discussions
- As a starting point for protocol review
- As a companion to screening and follow-up procedures

Stigma around suicide persists, especially among older individuals. Promoting access to care, support, and resources is key to building a safer, more supportive environment for all older Ohioans. A central theme of this toolkit is encouraging individuals to reach out rather than turn inward when it comes to their mental health and emotional well-being.

Older Ohioans bring immeasurable value to our communities through their contributions of knowledge, care, and support. Strong support systems for older adults strengthen communities, reduce healthcare strain, and improve intergenerational well-being.

A note: *A list of resources is included at the end of this toolkit to support the topics covered, including crisis support, suicide prevention and training, mental health service navigation, aging and long-term care, caregiver support, grief and bereavement, firearm safety, transportation and access, resources for Veterans, and addressing stigma.*

SOCIAL ISOLATION & SUICIDE RISK AMONG OLDER OHIOANS

Addressing concerns around suicide risk in older adults

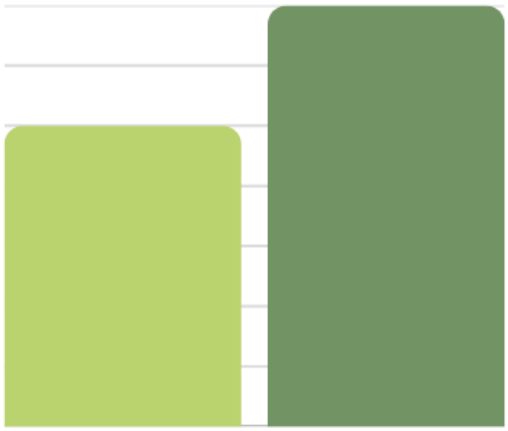
38%

of Ohioans age 60+ live alone



40%

increase in suicide rates among Ohioans age 60+ over the last decade



1 IN 3

adults age 65+ in Ohio lives on a fixed income

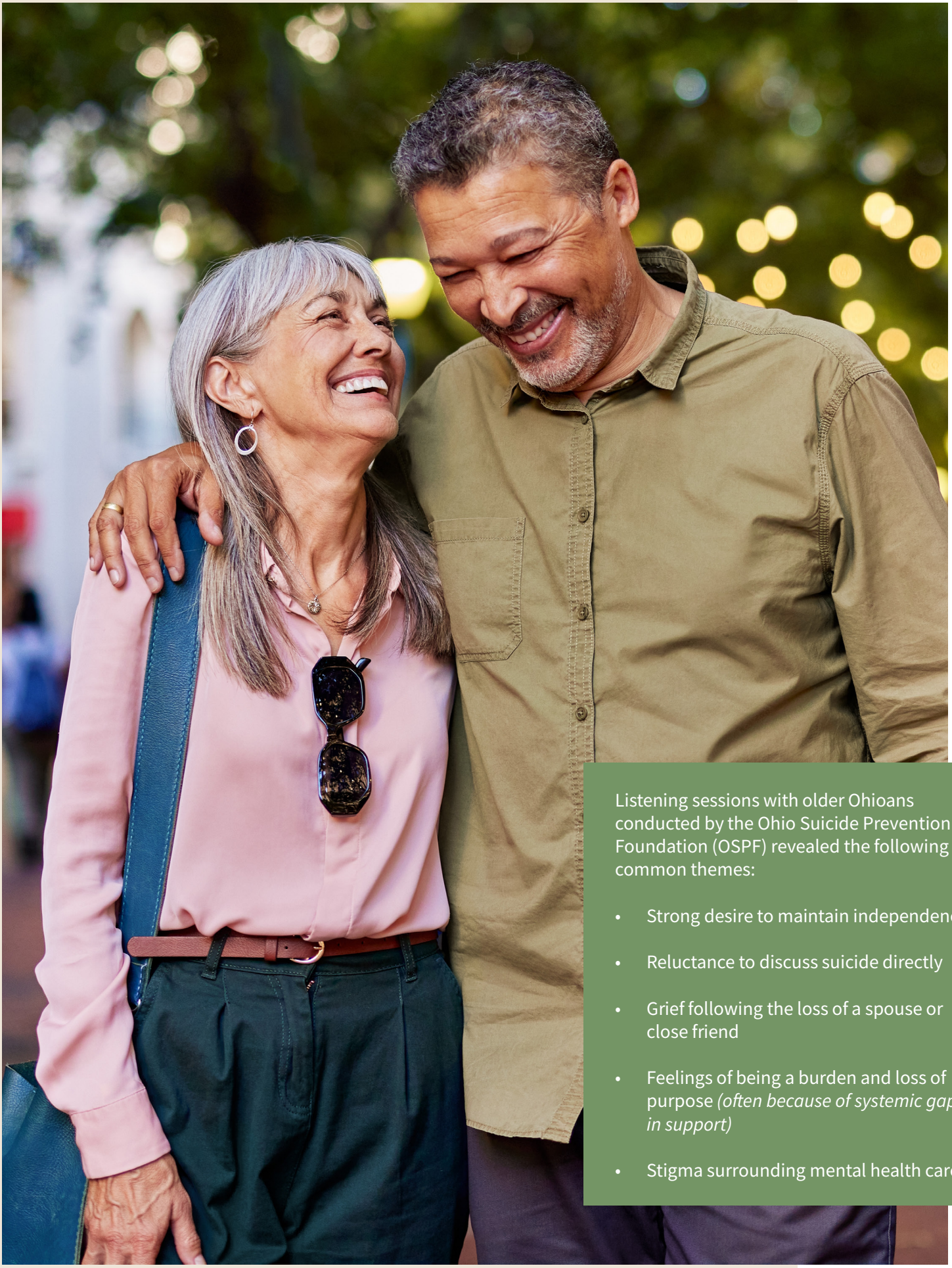


1 IN 4

older adults in Ohio experience social isolation

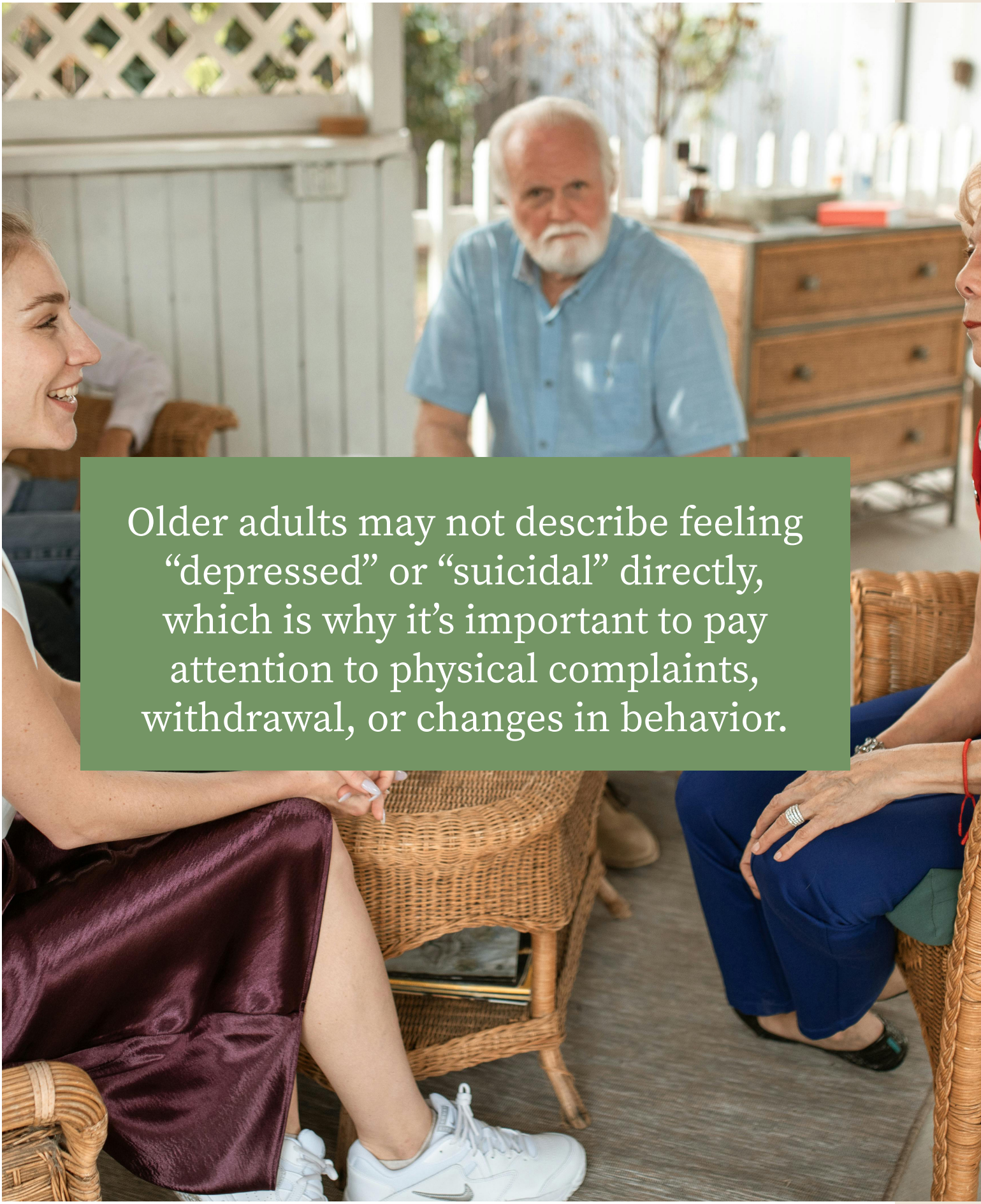


Older populations are experiencing increased levels of depression, isolation, and suicidality. Isolation reduces opportunities for detection and support, placing many older adults at risk of not seeking help.



Listening sessions with older Ohioans conducted by the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) revealed the following common themes:

- Strong desire to maintain independence
- Reluctance to discuss suicide directly
- Grief following the loss of a spouse or close friend
- Feelings of being a burden and loss of purpose *(often because of systemic gaps in support)*
- Stigma surrounding mental health care



Older adults may not describe feeling “depressed” or “suicidal” directly, which is why it’s important to pay attention to physical complaints, withdrawal, or changes in behavior.



Chronic Risk Factors: Long-term, underlying conditions or behaviors

Depression or anxiety

Social isolation and living alone

Chronic pain or illness

Cognitive decline or dementia

Grief (loss of a spouse, friend, family member, or pet)

Transportation or mobility barriers

Loss of independence or purpose

Physical health conditions

Housing or financial instability

Substance misuse or misuse of medications

Acute Warning Signs: Sudden, severe symptoms

Talking about wanting to die

Feeling like a burden

Withdrawal from activities

Sudden agitation, irritability, or restlessness

Increased hopelessness or despair

Stockpiling medications

Giving away possessions

Refusal to eat, drink, or take medications

Newly expressed fearlessness about death



IMMEDIATE SUPPORT & SAFETY PLANNING

Timely and targeted interventions can save lives. The following strategies can be implemented by professionals, caregivers, and community members:

Ways We Can Immediately Help

- Use clear, calm, and supportive language
- Remove or secure lethal means where legally and ethically appropriate
- Provide information about the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline for immediate emotional support
- If in a professional role, notify appropriate individuals (i.e. a supervisor) according to your organization's policy
- If in a caregiver role, determine whether authorities or additional support systems should be notified

Important: Resistance to interventions often stems from fear of losing independence. Respecting autonomy, taking small steps, and involving trusted medical professionals can help build trust.

Safety Planning

A safety plan should be personalized, practical, and accessible. The following items can be included in a safety plan:

- Warning sign checklist
- Coping strategies
- Information about crisis resources, including the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Environmental safety adjustments (e.g., removing medication stockpiles, securing firearms, reducing fall risks)

Cognitive impairments can affect one's ability to follow a safety plan. Cognitive support adaptations can include environment modifications like checklists, alarms, and AI-powered applications.

LONG-TERM SUPPORT:

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF CARE



Immediate intervention strategies should be followed by long-term approaches to support ongoing needs and promote quality of life.

Treatment & Support Pathways

- Online and in-person support groups
- Home modifications to increase independence (e.g., stair lifts, grab bars)
- Caregiver support and training

Community & Connection

- Identify opportunities for engagement (e.g., church, clubs, volunteer work)
- Encourage regular communication with family and friends
- Create a personalized grief support plan that includes trusted support contacts and resource information
- Use reflection tools like journaling

Firearms Safety & Legacy Planning

A Firearm Life Plan is a proactive step to ensure the safe handling and transfer of firearms in cases of aging, illness, or death. Plans include:

- Documenting firearms and locations
- Detailing safe storage methods (e.g., keys, codes)
- Identifying trusted transfer plans
- Monitoring cognitive or physical decline that might require plan adjustments

FOLLOW-UP & CONTINUITY

Follow-up is a critical component of long-term care. Here are guidelines for continuity:

- Schedule the next appointment with providers before the current visit ends
- Conduct interim phone check-ins
- Rescreen at regular intervals
- Communicate across providers (primary care, mental health, caregivers)
- Reinforce awareness of resources like the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

PROTECTIVE FACTORS:

BUILDING LAYERS OF SUPPORT



Protective factors reduce suicide risk and strengthen resilience. They are most effective when layered with support from family, community, and healthcare systems.

Examples include:

- Strong family or community relationships
- Access to mental health care
- Management of chronic pain and illness
- Awareness of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
- Sense of purpose and meaning (e.g., volunteering, caring for a pet)
- Safe and accessible living environments
- Stigma surrounding mental health care

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Reducing suicide risk means more than identifying warning signs. It also means recognizing and addressing real-life challenges that may prevent someone from accessing care.

Meeting people where they are means recognizing that providers and individuals may not fully understand all the barriers someone is facing. Factors like cultural values, language, stigma, past experiences with healthcare, and financial stress all shape how and whether someone seeks help.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

- **Stigma discourages help-seeking**
- **Transportation gaps limit access**
- **Cultural differences impact how warning signs are expressed and understood**
- **Navigating Medicare and Medicaid can be overwhelming**
- **Digital literacy and internet access hinder outreach**
- **Fear of losing independence prevents help-seeking**



What we can do to address these barriers

NORMALIZE HELP-SEEKING:
Use age-appropriate, respectful messaging that frames mental health care as a form of strength and self-care

PRACTICE CULTURAL HUMILITY:
Ask open-ended questions, listen without assumptions, and be willing to learn from the individual and their family

PROVIDE LANGUAGE-ACCESSIBLE MATERIALS:
Offer multilingual resources for assessments and information to improve understanding and comfort

SIMPLIFY SYSTEMS:
Help older adults and caregivers connect with trusted community partners to better understand the resources and benefits available to them

PRIORITIZE INDEPENDENCE:
When possible, involve the older adult in the decision-making process to help preserve dignity and build trust





ADDRESSING COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS

Cognitive impairments can make it harder to identify support needs.

Disorders like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Lewy Body Dementia can mask signs of depression and increase suicide risk. Ways we can help:

CONSISTENT SCREENING:
Monitor mood and behaviors, and rescreen at regular intervals

ADJUST COMMUNICATION:
Use direct language and repeat safety planning steps

MONITOR WARNING SIGNS:
Be aware of memory loss, changes in cognizance, language struggles, motor impairments, and behavior and mood shifts

INCREASE FOLLOW-UP:
Maintain regular appointments, provide interim phone check-ins, and reinforce use of 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline between visits

UPLIFTING CAREGIVERS SUPPORT

Caregiver burnout increases risk for older adults

Approximately one in three adults in the U.S. is a caregiver. The physical, emotional, and mental toll of caregiving can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression. Supporting the well-being of those providing care strengthens the entire system.



What Caregivers Can Do

- **Prioritize self-care:** Get adequate sleep, eat well, stay active, and maintain hobbies
- **Establish boundaries**: Schedule regular breaks and set realistic expectations
- **Join a support group:** Support groups are available online and in-person
- **Ask for help:** Reach out to family, friends, or colleagues when needed
- **Consult a professional:** Seek help from a licensed therapist who specializes in caregiver stress

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Agencies and providers can strengthen their suicide prevention initiatives by conducting internal assessments of policies, practices, and culture. These questions could be administered through an internal checklist or scoring rubric.

Do our screening protocols include older adults?

Are materials accessible in multiple languages?

Do staff receive training specific to aging and suicide risk?

Do we follow up after referrals?

Do we share resources like the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline?

Are we partnering with community organizations?



A critical component of any organizational assessment is understanding stigma and its role as a barrier to help, especially for individuals aged 60 and over. Stigma can lead to inadequate healthcare services, impacts on employment, alienation from groups and activities, and diminished opportunities. Organizations can reduce stigma related to mental health challenges by educating their teams on the harms of stigma and best practices to reduce stigma.

Note: *It's important to talk about aging in a way that counters ageism and promotes messaging strategies that support rather than alienate. Read the Communication Best Practices from the Reframing Aging initiative – available in our additional resources section – to learn more.*

SUICIDE PREVENTION IN OLDER OHIOANS:

THE DO'S & DON'TS



Recognize and respond early

- Pay attention to subtle warning signs like withdrawal, physical complaints, or behavior changes
- Take all mentions of death, burden, and hopelessness seriously

THE DO'S:

Use supportive communication

- Use direct language when asking about suicide using calm, nonjudgemental language
- Listen actively and validate concerns
- Respect autonomy

Reduce immediate risk

- Remove or secure lethal means
- Create a personalized safety plan
- Encourage safe medication management and home safety modifications
- Share crisis resources like the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Strengthen support

- Encourage consistent contact with family and friends
- Connect older adults with opportunities for involvement in activities or volunteering

Coordinate care and follow-up

- Create communication channels across providers, caregivers, and support systems
- Schedule follow-ups and conduct regular check-ins between visits

Address real-world barriers

- Identify and address challenges with transportation, finances, and healthcare systems
- Provide culturally responsive and language-accessible support

Support caregivers

- Encourage caregivers to take breaks and seek support
- Connect caregivers with support groups and professional resources
- Educate caregivers on warning signs



THE DON'TS:

Don't make assumptions or minimize concerns

- Avoid waiting for explicit statements of depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts
- Don't overlook physical complaints or subtle behavioral changes
- Don't ignore statements about feeling like a burden

Don't avoid conversations about suicide

- Asking about suicide does not increase risk
- Avoiding the topic can increase isolation

Don't disregard the older adult

- Avoid excluding the older adult from decision-making

Don't overlook systemic barriers

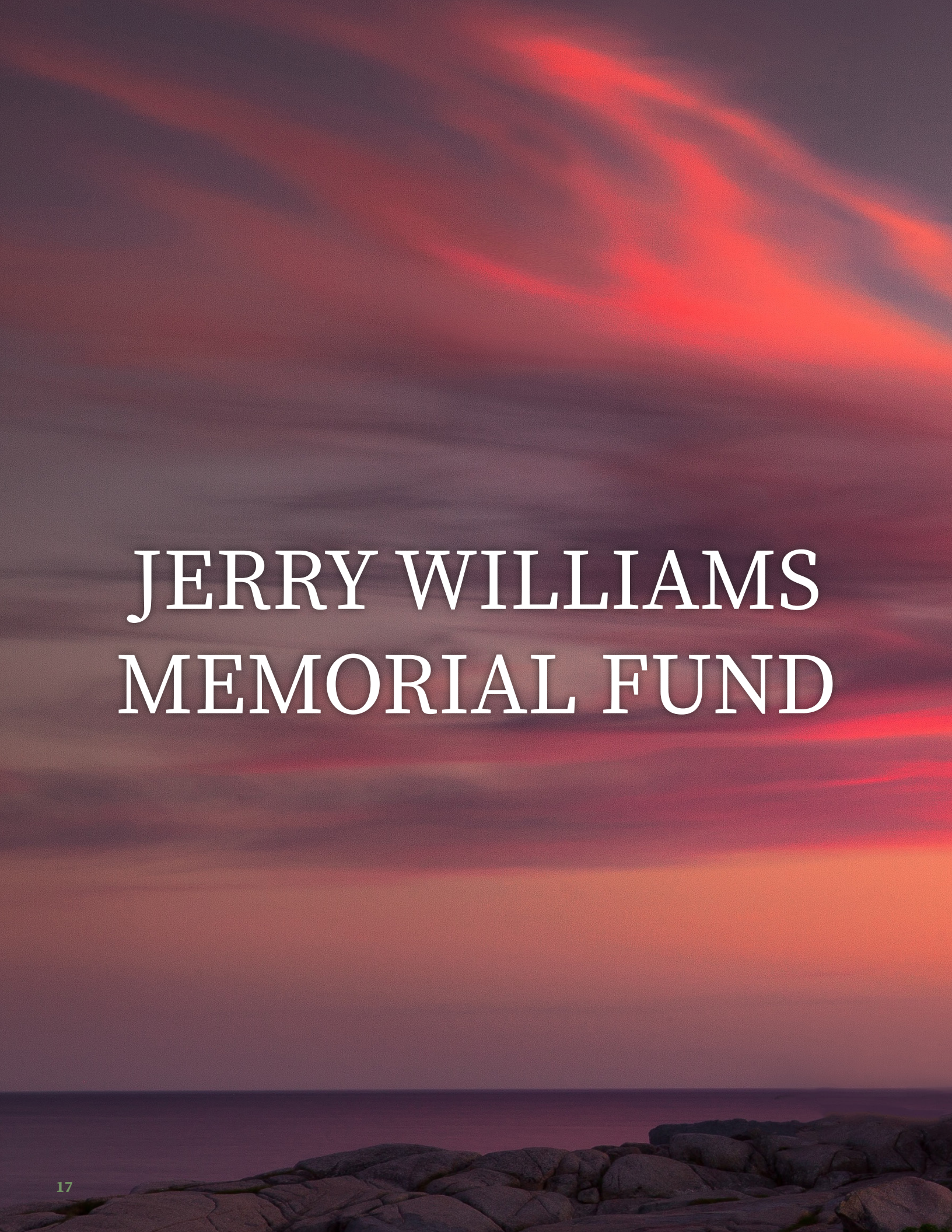
- Avoid assuming access to care is simple or equally available
- Don't ignore cultural differences, stigma, or financial challenges

Don't neglect follow-up

- Forgoing regular check-ins can leave individuals feeling unsupported
- Don't assume caregivers have the resources they need beyond initial outreach
- Don't assume someone is "ok" after one interaction

Don't use complex language

- Don't ignore cognitive impairments that might impact understanding
- Avoid vague language



JERRY WILLIAMS MEMORIAL FUND

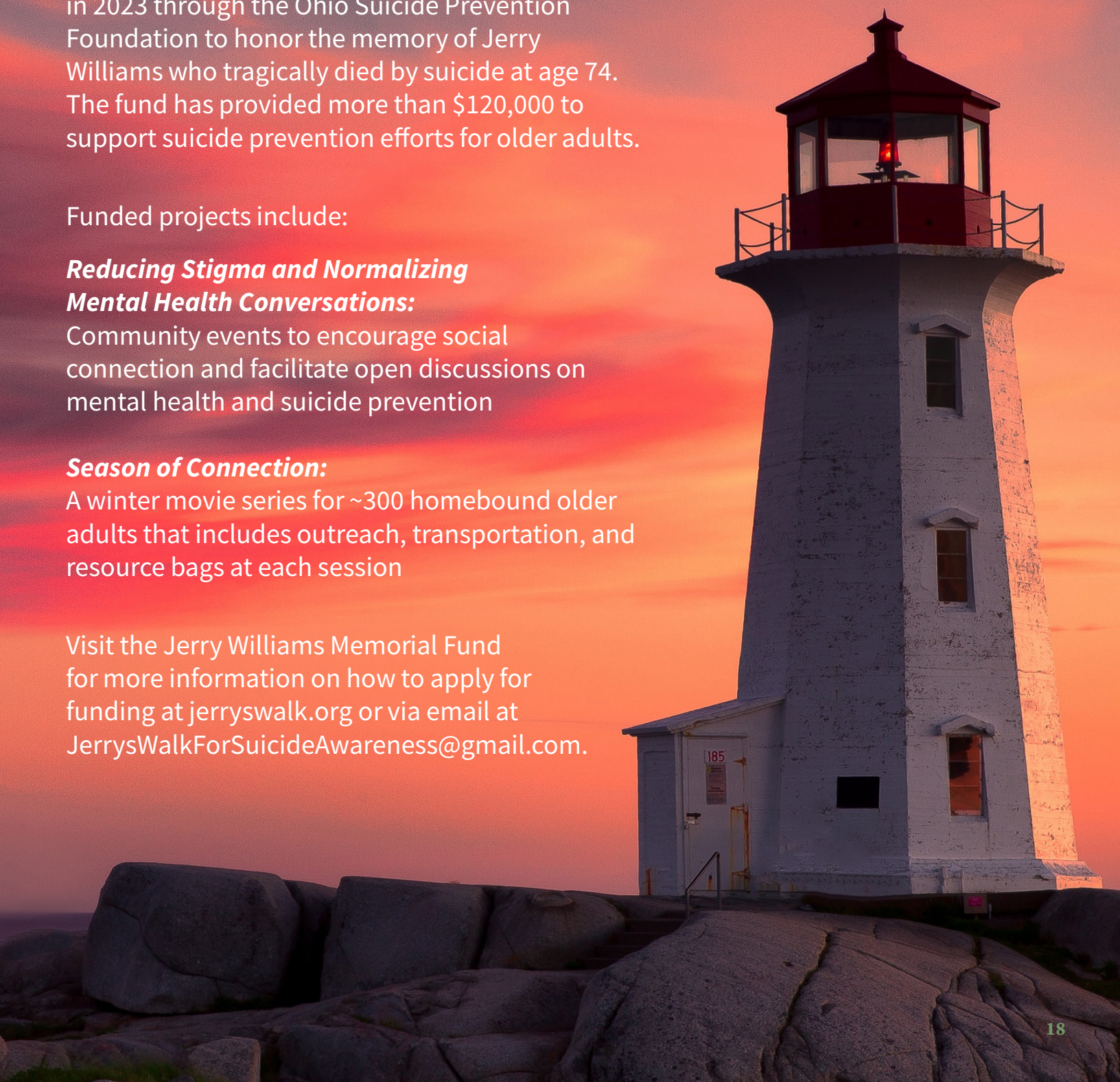
The Jerry Williams Memorial Fund was established in 2023 through the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation to honor the memory of Jerry Williams who tragically died by suicide at age 74. The fund has provided more than $120,000 to support suicide prevention efforts for older adults.

Funded projects include:

Reducing Stigma and Normalizing Mental Health Conversations:
Community events to encourage social connection and facilitate open discussions on mental health and suicide prevention

Season of Connection:
A winter movie series for ~300 homebound older adults that includes outreach, transportation, and resource bags at each session

Visit the Jerry Williams Memorial Fund for more information on how to apply for funding at jerryswalk.org or via email at JerrysWalkForSuicideAwareness@gmail.com.



APPENDIX A:

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This is an index of the resources mentioned in the toolkit, as well as additional resources sorted into the following categories: crisis support, suicide prevention and training, mental health service navigation, aging and long-term care, caregiver support, grief and bereavement, firearm safety, transportation and access, resources for Veterans, and addressing stigma.



CRISIS & IMMEDIATE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline
Call, text, or chat for free, confidential support available 24/7 .

Crisis Text Line
Text "HOME" to 741741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor. Free, confidential support is available 24/7.

Alzheimer's Association Helpline
Call 800-272-3900 for free, confidential support available 24/7 that includes information, emotional support, crisis assistance, and local care referrals for people living with dementia, caregivers, and families.

BRIDGES for Older Adults
Behavioral Health Resources for Integrated Development, Growth, Engagement, and Support (BRIDGES) for Older Adults empowers organizations and individuals to effectively recognize, respond to, and refer older adults with behavioral health concerns to community and evidence-based self-management programming.

SUICIDE PREVENTION EDUCATION & SCREENING TOOLS

National Institute of Mental Health
Ask Suicide-Screening Questions (ASQ)
Review a set of four screening questions that take twenty seconds to administer and help identify individuals who may need further assessment for mental health and suicide safety.

QPR: Question. Persuade. Refer.
via Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation
QPR is an emergency intervention that teaches individuals to recognize warning signs, engage in conversations, and connect someone in crisis to professionals.
Call 614-429-1528 to learn more.

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation
Visit ohiospf.org/resources to access suicide prevention tools, training information, and educational materials.

Ohio Center of Excellence – Stronger Connection for Older Adults
Access customizable social media kits, prevention-focused podcasts, blog posts, and more in its online resource library.

MENTAL HEALTH & COMMUNITY RESOURCE NAVIGATION

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
via Behavioral Health Treatment Locator
Visit findtreatment.gov to search for mental health and substance use treatment providers by ZIP code.

2-1-1
Dial 2-1-1 to connect with free, confidential referrals to local health and community services.

Community Cultural Organizations
Organizations such as National Alliance on Mental Illness – Ohio (NAMI), Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation, and the Refugee and Immigrant Mental Health Coalition of Ohio can provide access to culturally relevant resources including statewide partnerships and local coalitions that serve diverse communities.

AGING & LONG-TERM CARE SERVICES

Ohio Department of Aging
Call 866-243-5678 to connect with your local Area Agency on Aging and learn more about services available in your community, including in-home support, referrals, caregiver training, and advocacy guardrails.

Area Agencies on Aging
Ohio's 12 regional agencies aid with in-home care, home-delivered meals, caregiver support, benefits counseling, and long-term care planning tailored to local needs.

PASSPORT Program
For Medicaid eligible adults, access long-term services and support to remain safe in their homes or other community-based settings.

John A. Hartford Foundation - Age-Friendly Care: It's About What Matters to You
Find age-friendly care, explore resources for family caregivers, and access a health checklist designed to help older adults get the most out of medical appointments.



Scan QR Code
Access all listed resources here.

CAREGIVER SUPPORT & EDUCATION

Caregiver Action Network
Explore resources and access peer support, education, and tools to help caregivers navigate challenges and practice self-care .

Family Caregiver Alliance
Browse caregiver education, peer support, and resources to help caregivers address emotional well-being and navigate complex responsibilities.

Alzheimer's Association
Access caregiver resources, emotional support, and guidance on caring for individuals with Alzheimer's and other dementias.

GRIEF & BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

Grief Support Groups
via OhioHealth
Participate in online and in-person support groups for individuals coping with loss.

Pathways of Hope
via Ohio's Hospice
Learn more about grief counseling services for patients, families, and friends of Ohio's Hospice.

Scan QR Code
Access all listed resources here.

FIREARM SAFETY & LETHAL MEANS SAFETY

Life Side Ohio
Learn more about safe firearm storage and its importance.

Firearms Legacy Planning
Explore worksheets and guidance on firearm succession planning.

TRANSPORTATION & ACCESS TO CARE

County Job & Family Services
Contact your local office to arrange Medicaid transportation services for healthcare appointments.

Hocking, Athens, Perry Community Action
via GoBus
Access GoBus transportation services to connect rural residents with healthcare appointments and services.

Ohio Aging and Disability Transportation Coalition
Learn more about transportation options and access to mobility managers for Ohio residents through the Ohio Aging and Disability Transportation Coalition.

SUPPORT FOR VETERANS

Caregiver Support
Access caregiver-specific resources, including a caregiver support line (855-260-3274).

Suicide Prevention
Review prevention, coping, and support resources for suicide prevention from the VA.

Healthcare
Learn more about healthcare resources available through the VA, including help for Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Housing Assistance
Find benefits and services to assist with building and improving homes, as well as housing assistance grants.



STIGMA REDUCTION

WISE: Initiative for Stigma Elimination
Gain access to courses, research, podcasts, resources, and more to help counteract the harmful impacts of stigma.

The Impact of Stigma
via Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation
Better understand stigma, why it's a problem, and what can be done to combat it via this shareable one-pager.

How to Talk to Someone About Suicide
via Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation
This sharable one-pager covers six steps to move from having a regular conversation to asking about suicide.

Communication Best Practices
via Reframing Aging Initiative
Better understand how using communication best practices like age-inclusive and bias-free language is crucial to improving people's understanding of what aging means.



A NOTE OF THANKS

This guide was created with support from the Older Adult Suicide Prevention Steering Committee, a group of thought leaders and community partners who share a vested interest in supporting the mental health and needs of Ohioans across Ohio.

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988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: *Call or Text 988*