

THE MESSENGER

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How Skilled Nursing Facilities Help Seniors Through the Post-Holiday Blues

There has been an enduring myth that suicides peak in December, as those who may be experiencing loss or heartache are unable or uninterested in partaking in the season's festivities. But according to the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), the suicide rate is actually lowest in December. It's the post-holiday season that may bring a greater risk of depression.

Because health issues—which may prevent people from participating in life with the same vigor as when they were younger—can trigger depression, those living in skilled nursing facilities may be particularly at risk. Here are some ways today's nursing homes are helping ensure their residents and patients keep their spirits up throughout the year.

Provide treatment. One of the advantages of living in an environment dedicated to improving a senior's health is that depression has a better chance of being diagnosed and treated. Depression is a highly treatable condition and seniors, as a group, typically respond well. Treatment may include everything from talk therapy to medication to providing an environment that is conducive to positive thoughts.

Provide opportunities for exercise. For those who are able, nursing homes generally provide daily exercise classes, which can have powerful mood-boosting effects. A study at Duke University found that among people

older than 50 who were majorly depressed, those who exercised for their therapy showed significant improvement compared to those who received medication alone. And the exercise wasn't extensive—it consisted of walking briskly for 30 minutes three times a week.

Provide opportunities for socialization. Isolation is a huge trigger for depression, so connecting to social activities can literally be lifesaving. Most nursing homes have daily activities, from birthday celebrations to movie nights to the ever-popular Bingo. There is always something going on for residents to participate in.

Ensure they're getting the proper nutrition they need. Numerous studies have shown a link between sugar and refined carbohydrates (white flour, white rice, pasta) and depression. These foods cause inflammation in the brain, which can cause depression. A study published in JAMA Psychiatry found brain inflammation was 30 percent higher in patients who were clinically depressed. Most nursing homes have dietitians on staff, who help ensure residents are receiving a balanced diet of nutritious, tasty foods.

Helping them get a good night's sleep. According to the National Institutes of Health, almost half of all adults age 60 and older have some degree of insomnia, which can exacerbate depression. Here are just some of



Continued on page 4

A Top Risk Factor for Senior Financial Exploitation Is Often Overlooked

Financial elder abuse is a huge, yet underreported, problem today. Experts estimate that seniors are bilked out of more than \$36.5 billion every year.

Seniors are tempting targets for crooks. They may own their own homes, have a nice nest egg, and have good credit. They may be more trusting, and ashamed to report a crime if they're victimized. Dementia raises the risk considerably. And, says a study from Wayne State University, seniors who are lonely are especially vulnerable.

Loneliness, experts tell us, is distressing and emotionally painful for members of our socially oriented species. Loneliness raises the risk of heart disease, dementia and even death. Some common changes of later life—such as the loss of a spouse, health challenges and memory loss—may reduce the social circle of elders. Lacking a regular social outlet, they may become vulnerable to fake friendship, such as ...

- Con artists selling worthless products, who feign an interest in a lonely senior's life before making their move ... often again and again.
- Phony charities that play on a senior's heartstrings and the desire to make a difference—yet give little or none of the money to a legitimate cause.
- “Lonely hearts” confidence scams when a stranger cultivates a friendly or romantic relationship with an elder to induce them to hand over money and assets.
- A “friendly stranger” who offers to help with financial matters or care tasks, only to drain a senior's bank account or move their money into useless investments.

These skilled swindlers can be very methodic. They often maintain a dossier on senior victims so they'll have personal information at the ready as they create the illusion of friendship. They may exchange or sell information to other crooks once they've established a likely victim.

Sadly, sometimes the swindler is no stranger. Each year seniors are financially exploited by friends, family members or trusted paid professionals. The U.S. Administration for Community Living is set to launch the National Adult Maltreatment Reporting System, which



will collect data on this problem.

Protecting lonely elders

Here are steps you can take to combat this modern epidemic:

First, talk about it. Seniors who have been swindled may hesitate to admit it. They are embarrassed. They fear losing their independence. They even may be emotionally attached to the perpetrator. If your loved one won't confide in you, enlist the help of other family members, or professionals such as a bank manager or attorney.

Second, report it. If you suspect your loved one has been the victim of financial elder abuse, report it to your local authorities or to the U.S. Department of Justice. Your loved one may ask you not to do so, especially if the perpetrator was a friend or family member. Your loved one will need your emotional support at this time.

Third, step in to help your loved one safeguard their money, property and personal information. You or some other trusted person may wish to serve as your loved one's Power of Attorney. Enlist the help your loved one's financial advisor and an elder law attorney.

Fourth, help your loved one enlarge their circle of social contacts. Social contact is a great “inoculation” against being ripped off. Brainstorm with your loved one

Continued on page 4

How to Maintain a Healthy Weight in the New Year

At this time of year, it's hard to keep the pounds off! After the overindulgence of the holidays, going back to controlled portions and eating foods that "do a body good" can be challenging.

And did you know that there may be an evolutionary component to the urge to overeat during winter? A new study from the University of Exeter suggests that just as many animals overeat in preparation for winter when food is scarce, humans may also have evolved to overeat to compensate for the lack of food during the harsh winter months. When humans first appeared on Earth, being underweight posed a much greater risk than being overweight and it was much harder to find food during wintertime. We have not yet evolved to overcome that biological hard wiring, even though, for the vast majority of the planet's humans, winter no longer poses any real threat to the ability to gather food. To make matters worse, much of today's food supply focuses on treats and snacks with lots of sugar and fat to enhance flavor. This makes the urge to consume these foods stronger than our evolutionary mechanism that tells us we've had enough and to stop eating.

So, what can we do to help ensure we maintain a healthy weight during the winter months? Here are a few great tips.

Don't stop exercising. Stay as active as weather allows. Staying active burns calories, which helps shed those unwanted pounds. Another benefit is that you'll build muscle, and muscle tissue burns more calories—even when you're at rest—than does fat. If your healthcare provider gives you the okay, try out winter sports such as snowshoeing or cross-country skiing. Head to your local senior center to take a yoga or tai chi class. Call up a friend and go bowling. By staying active, you'll not only feel better in the short term, but you'll also be laying the groundwork for many long-term benefits.

Become conscious of how much you really need to eat. It's tempting to load up our plates with every imaginable culinary delight, particularly at parties or even when dining out, especially if we're hungry. So the first step in

maintaining proper portion control is to simply recognize that your body doesn't need everything you crave. Try this experiment: Take (or order) half of what you normally would (if eating out, share an entrée instead of having one for yourself). Eat more slowly. Try to make the meal last at least 20 minutes. After that, if you're still hungry, consider ordering a side dish or some dessert. If you practice this enough, it's likely you'll soon discover that you feel full after eating less food. And that's a good first step in losing weight.

Don't cut out fats entirely. Fats have a bad reputation for packing on the pounds. But science is beginning to take issue with this notion. First of all, many low-fat or nonfat foods are loaded with sugar (and therefore, calories), which can be more harmful to health than fats. Second, not all fats are created equal. Many foods high in fat—avocados, olive oil, wild salmon, walnuts—have numerous benefits and can actually improve our health. As with all things, it is best to eat all fats in moderation as part of a balanced diet. And there are fats you should always avoid—trans

fats being the main culprit. In fact, the FDA recently ordered all food manufacturers to stop using trans fats within three years because of the potential danger they present.

Make healthier choices. Instead of having a glass of orange juice in the morning (which isn't a bad food choice, but is loaded with calories), substitute a glass of water. If that seems unthinkable, try a "half and half"—half orange juice, half water. That way, you'll get most of the taste with half the calories. Instead of potato chips, have a bowl of air-popped popcorn or, better yet, an apple. Instead of ice cream, try some fruit sorbet. Instead of a prepackaged, microwavable entrée (which is no doubt loaded with unnecessary salt, sugar and trans fats), fix something from fresh, whole ingredients.

Maintaining a healthy weight is one of the best things you can do to improve your overall health and well-being. Conscious eating can be challenging during the winter months, but with a little planning, determination and encouragement, you should be able to meet your goals.

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Post-Holiday Blues *from page 1*

the ways nursing homes help ensure their residents are getting the sleep they need:

- Increasing daytime activities (and reducing daytime napping) and reducing disturbances to nighttime sleep
- Encouraging exposure to sun and light during the day and darkness at night
- Reviewing and providing medications to assist with improved sleep

Encourage a positive attitude. A skilled healthcare team understands the importance of a positive attitude toward maintaining good health. A study from Yale University demonstrated that positive attitudes about aging could extend one's life by 7-1/2 years. That's why nursing home staffs are constantly encouraging residents to stay active, providing comfort during difficult times, and being available for a chat or a friendly smile. They understand that compassion goes a long way in fostering a positive attitude among nursing home residents.

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Financial Exploitation *from page 2*

and other family members if appropriate. What would help your loved one get out more? Transportation to the senior center, social events or faith community? Volunteer opportunities? Special activities for seniors with memory loss? If your loved one lives in an assisted living or other supported living community, talk to the staff about ways to engage your loved one. And don't forget that Facebook and other social media, while not as good as in-person friendships, have been found to reduce isolation and depression in older adults.

One win-win opportunity

Seniors who have been swindled can join advocacy and education groups, such as AARP's ElderWatch, to help other older adults protect themselves. These justice-minded elders provide informative tips and "red flag awareness" for their peers—and, of course, there's nothing more convincing than hearing someone else's cautionary tale! Seniors who participate report enjoying camaraderie and an enhanced sense of purpose.

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