

It's Never too Late: The Benefits of Counseling

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Approaching an important milestone – his eightieth birthday, Harry started reflecting on his life and didn't like what he saw. He had struggled through a lot of things – a failed business, loss of his wife 10 years prior, adult children he rarely saw, and now aging knees that make getting around very difficult. His retirement had not turned out the way he thought it would. He often found himself feeling “cranky” and very tired. Moving into Assisted Living six months ago, Harry thought this would be the answer. However, it did not help his mood. Harry decided to seek out the help of a counselor who regularly came to see several other residents living in his new community. “I don't know how many more years I am going to live... I want them to be easier and I want to feel better” he told the therapist.

Harry is now part of a growing trend of seniors seeking emotional support in their later years to improve their quality of life. Having grown up in a generation when only “mentally ill” people went to a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, historically most people never thought to reveal their feelings to a trained professional. More often, individuals turned to family, friends, or to resources at their church or synagogue. But now, as people are living longer, and the stigma of psychological counseling is beginning to change, some more educated consumers are recognizing the need to take care of their emotional health, just as they treat their physical concerns. With the additional benefit of Medicare actually paying for psychotherapy services, often with little out of pocket expense, it may make this an additional motivational factor in seeking out assistance.

Identifying and treating depression in the elderly presents unique challenges to all involved. Depression can be caused by underlying medical

problems, and for those instances, treatment of the medical problem may help resolve the depression. However, we recognize that there are other possible causes of depression and certainly transitions in living arrangements and loss of functional status are all highly contributory. Interestingly, researchers have now demonstrated that generally older adults report higher satisfaction scores in therapy than younger people. This may be related that older adults when engaged in psychotherapy, may be more committed and serious in the sessions and less tolerant of wasted time.

Elder Care professionals typically turn to The Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) as a screen for Depression in the elderly. It is very easy to self administer, with all questions being answered yes or no, although the scoring is a bit more complex.

1. Are you basically satisfied with your life?
Y N

2. Have you dropped many of your activities and interests?
Y N
3. Do you feel that life is empty?
Y N
4. Do you often get bored?
Y N
5. Are you in good spirits most of the time?
Y N
6. Are you afraid that something bad is going to happen to you?

Y N
7. Do you feel happy most of the time?
Y N
8. Do you often feel helpless? Y N
9. Do you prefer to stay at home rather than go out and do new things?
Y N
10. Do you feel you have more problems with memory than most?

Y N
11. Do you think it is wonderful to be alive now? Y N
12. Do you feel pretty worthless the way you are now? Y N

13. Do you feel full of energy? Y N
14. Do you feel that your situation is hopeless?
Y N
15. Do you think that most people are better off than you are?
Y N

Scoring: 1 point for each “no” on 1,5,7,11,13,

1 point for each “yes” on 2,3,4,6,8,9,10,12,14,15

A score of 5 or more suggests Depression. (Mildly depressed = 6-10; Very depressed = 11-15)

Harry scored a 9, and can attest – “Everybody needs help occasionally; why wait if something can be done to make your life better?” He meets with his psychotherapist weekly to explore problems weighing on him and to find alternative ways to understand and address them. “I have learned I can’t hold onto things that happened in the past – the good and bad – I can only go forward.”

Remarkably, his family actually started to visit him more often and they all seemed to improve the quality of the time spent together.

If you know someone who may benefit from supportive counseling, it is important to seek the help of an appropriately licensed health care professional.

Elder Life Management provides counseling services in the privacy of your home or our offices, often incorporated following a Comprehensive Consultation. For further information please call Elder Life Management at 732-493-8080 or visit our website www.elderlifemanagement.org.