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Mindful Aging and Mental Health

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Objectives

- Define “normal” mental health status in older adults
- Identify self-bias regarding cognition of older adults
- Describe interventions to promote mental health in older adults.
- Identify how to incorporate mindfulness into the care of the older adult.

Importance of mentally healthy aging

- 16% of the world will be over the age of 60 by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2025)
- Will increase to 20% by 2050, representing 2.1 billion people (World Health Organization, 2025)
- 2020 US Census showed about 56 million adults over the age of 65 (Caplan, 2023)
- 12.5% have a mental illness, and 9% have a substance use disorder (SAMHSA, American Psychiatric Association, 2024)

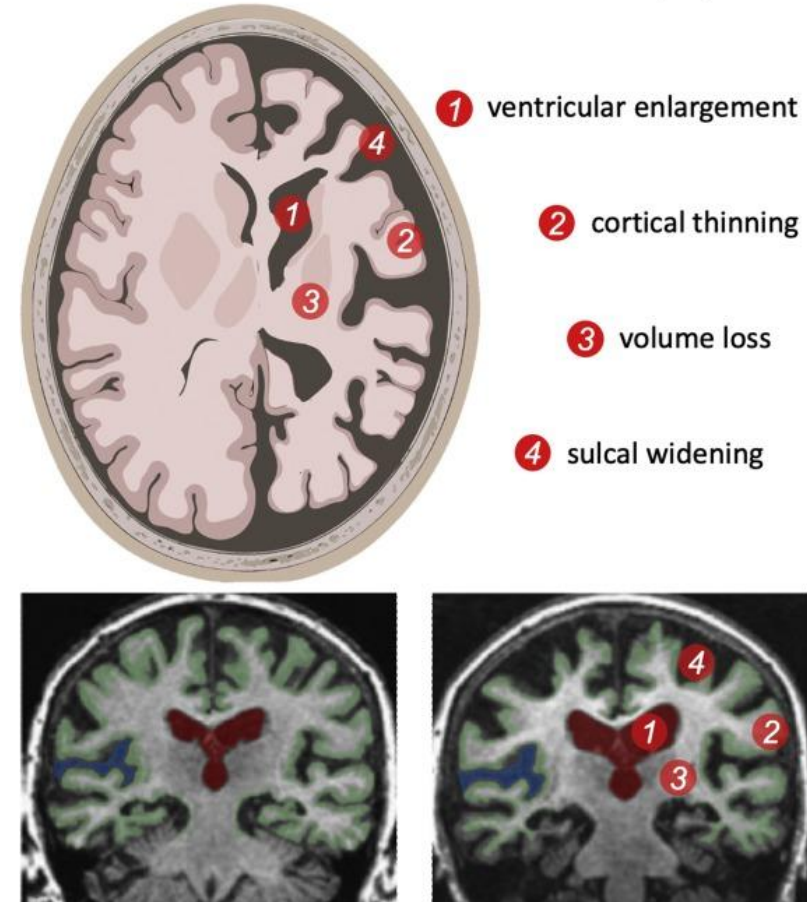


AGING AND THE BRAIN

Structural Changes

- Volume decreases
- Grey matter degenerates
 - Dendrites shorten, slowing neurotransmission
- White matter demyelinates
- Ventricles enlarge
- Sulci widen
- Blood flow decreased
 - Vessels harden due to atherosclerosis
- Debris accumulates
 - Lee & Kim (2022)

hallmark features of cerebral atrophy



<https://share.google/RWRkZW0Qvh5Z5E3fc>
Science Direct

Biochemical & Metabolic Changes

- Loss of cholinergic and some nicotinic acetylcholine receptors
 - Short term memory
- Decrease in dopamine & serotonin production and receptors
 - Cognitive flexibility, learning and memory
- Decrease in neuro-steroid production
 - Lose protective effects of estrogen and testosterone
 - Blood brain barrier more permeable
 - Dysfunction in glucose metabolism

Lee & Kim (2022)



Effects of Medical Conditions

High blood pressure

- Decreased blood flow, cognitive impairment, increased risk for stroke

High cholesterol

- Clogged arteries, increasing risk for HTN, stroke, heart attack and cognitive impairment

Overweight/obesity

- Increased inflammation, increased risk for cognitive and memory problems

Depression

- Increased risk for stroke and Alzheimer's disease

Hearing Loss

- Increased risk of social isolation and dementia

Brain health



What is Brain Health?



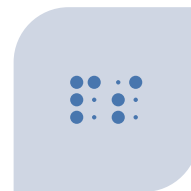
COGNITION



MOTOR
FUNCTION



EMOTIONAL
FUNCTION



TACTILE
FUNCTION



SENSORY
FUNCTION

National Institute on Aging (2024)

How to Keep Your Brain Healthy

Six Pillars of Brain Health





MENTAL HEALTH AND THE OLDER ADULT

Mental Health and Older Adults

Mental health is “emotional, psychological, and social well-being.” National Institute of Mental Health (2026)

Most older adults are satisfied with their lives

Challenges:

- Physical illness
- Loss of loved ones
- Bereavement overload



MINDFULNESS

Breathe

CLOUD GAZING

exercise

Spend time with nature

Walk BAREFOOT

Open mind

RELAX
RELAX
RELAX

guided meditation

Plant

Cook

Take a bath

Take things for granted

chat with friends

<listen>

FORGIVE
FORGIVE
FORGIVE

What is Mindfulness?



A skill people can learn to use to stay present in the moment.



Involves being aware of your thoughts, feelings, and body responses, along with the current environment.



Purpose is to be truly present and enjoy the experience without judgement.

How it Works

- Through intentional focus and repetition, mindfulness
 - Enhances neuroplasticity
 - Encourages new connections to form
 - Increases grey matter in the hippocampus
 - Reduces grey matter in the amygdala
 - Slows down the normal changes of aging



• Wang, 2018

Getty Images, Mayo Clinic

Benefits of Mindfulness

Mayo Clinic (2026)



Improved sleep quality

Reduction in anxiety and depression symptoms

Decreased perception of stress

Lower levels of cortisol

Improved glycemic, asthma, & hypertension control

Techniques



- Mindful Meditation (National Health Service UK, 2026)
 - Awareness of breathing
 - Body scan
 - Walking
- STOP
 - Pause, breathe, observe, proceed intentionally
- 5-4-3-2-1
 - Use your senses to identify what you can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste
- Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction
- Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy
 - Hoffman & Gomez (2017)

Mindfulness Games (NAMI, 2024)



COLOR
MANDALAS



GRATITUDE
JAR



“I AM”
POEM



MINDFUL
COUNTING



COLOR
HUNT



PINWHEEL
BREATHING



BUBBLE
BLOWING

Applying Mindfulness to the Older Adult Population

- Prevention Focus
 - Health fairs
 - Classes led by trained mental health professionals
 - Go to where the people are:
 - Senior center, YMCA, farmer's market, ADRC
 - Primary care



Resources

- Healthy Aging and Dementia Resources:

- <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/health-care-professionals-information/healthy-aging-and-dementia-resources-health-care>

- Aging and Disability Resource Centers (WI):

- <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/adrc/index.htm>

- Wisconsin Mindfulness Therapists (verified by Psychology Today):

- https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/wisconsin?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=905482755&gbraid=0AAAAAD_gfuwasC1H9-niFJ7xcz8c08KDx&gclid=Cj0KCQjw_b_QBhCSARIsAP6hR4eJRSwptkkpPU0FotGRu_lggjb0YrNpdIxyPt7VZVX-4WncB4zhOYYaAi9FEALw_wcB

Free Apps

- Mindfulness Coach
 - US Department of Veterans Affairs
- The Mindfulness App
- Calm
- Mirror (self-reflection and journaling)

QUESTIONS

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Thank you!

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