

## Better Resident Mental Health in Five Steps

Mental health concerns are common among seniors, and many don't get the mental health treatment they need. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 15% of adults over 60 have a mental health disorder. By addressing issues like social isolation and chronic pain, senior living communities can provide safe, secure, and sociable homes for residents.

These five tips will help you keep residents connected, enhance their quality of life, and enable you and your staff to promptly identify any mental health needs or changes in condition.

- 1. Be observant.** What does their body language say? Do they smile and respond to greetings and conversation? Do they answer questions directly? Are there any changes in their demeanor? Do they display any signs of problems like depression (e.g., staring in space, crying, sleeping all the time, not leaving their bed or room, not eating, etc.)? "This is a quick way to uncover if someone is suffering from a mental health issue, even if they are in denial or just don't want to talk about their feelings," says Pamela Truscott, director of quality improvement at the American Health Care Association/ National Center for Assisted Living.
- 2. Educate staff...completely and consistently.** Train them about mental health issues and signs to watch for in their residents. Coach staff about questions they can ask to get residents comfortable enough to share their feelings. Remind them, suggests Truscott, that "many of the same tools and resources we use to help them manage stress – such as meditation, deep breathing exercises, and pursuing hobbies – can be shared with their residents as well. They can be educated to employ some of these tools with others." Training on mental health should be part of onboarding but also addressed regularly in posters, emails, staff meetings, family night programs, and other efforts.
- 3. Let residents and families know about services and resources available to help them.** Prioritize efforts to de-stigmatize mental health issues. Let residents and families know that there is nothing to be ashamed of and that it is important to seek help promptly. Stress that problems like depression or anxiety are not "normal" aspects of aging and that "just getting over it" or "being tough" is not the answer. Help them understand the options for treatment and how to identify the best strategy for them. Encourage them to talk to a staff member or practitioner if they are concerned about themselves or a loved one.
- 4. Be creative.** "There are some very creative ideas out there," says Truscott. For example, there are robots that can carry on conversations and artificial intelligence programs that enable people to talk and interact with a virtual "friend." At the same time, virtual reality technology is available that enables people to "visit" any place they want or enjoy experiences like riding a roller coaster or flying in a hot



# Better Resident Mental Health in Five Steps (Cont.)

air balloon. Some communities have partnerships with schools where, for example, residents read stories to children; and there are opportunities to arrange for pets to come in and spend time with residents. Truscott visited a facility that had a robot and says, "Residents really enjoyed talking to it." At the same time, staff could have more productive interactions with residents and not feel bad because they couldn't spend an hour chatting with Mrs. Jones or Mr. Smith.

**5. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.** "Any approach to addressing mental health and wellbeing has to be individualized," says Truscott. Drawing and painting may be tremendously therapeutic for one person, while someone else has no interest in this. Make an effort to get to know what brings joy and comfort to each resident and customize interventions accordingly. For instance, Mr. Jones loves dogs. However, he raised hunting dogs and always owned hounds. He may love pet visits, but he's not likely to connect with a chihuahua or a toy poodle.

Addressing mental health and overcoming the stigmas associated with mental illness requires an ongoing investment of time and energy. "We have to keep this topic on the table and keep talking about it," says Truscott. She adds, "You may need a champion to lead the conversation and keep it going." She cautions against ignoring this issue or trying to push it under the rug. "It won't go away," she observes; "and left untreated, mental health issues can cause people to lose their independence and ability to function and result in accidents, illnesses, and hospitalizations."

In prioritizing mental health, start with staff. "If we care for our staff and they are in a good place mentally, they are better prepared to help their residents," says Truscott. When they are encouraged to recognize when they are hurting and to seek the help and support they need, they can continue to do the work they love and have the quality of life we want everyone to enjoy.