OBJECTIVES
1. To identify ways aging and circumstances affect older people (e.g., behavior, disease, environment, finances).
2. To discuss how age-related limitations affect daily living.
3. To select three ways to help older people with functional limitations.

BACKGROUND
When interacting with people do not focus too much on their age. Just because a person may be 80 or 90 years old does not mean he or she is frail or dependent on others for the basic necessities associated with everyday living. Instead of “How old?” it is better to consider “How functional?” Age-related changes may or may not impact one’s ability to perform daily living activities.

- Visible changes such as age-spots, gray hair and wrinkles have NO impact on daily living activities.
- Natural changes affecting vision, hearing, muscle and bone mass and memory may present functional challenges. Notable concerns often include the inability to read small print and actively participate in conversations. Additionally older people face an increased risk of falling and injury.
- Age-related conditions, such as arthritis, dementia, heart disease and/or stroke can make it difficult for people to perform daily living activities (e.g., cooking, cleaning, driving, walking) and may present safety risks.

To address these challenges, some people opt to use assistive devices, (e.g., cane, walker, hearing aid, glasses) while others enlist the help of family and professional caregivers to make life easier. Other challenges may simply become a part of life that people need to adjust to.

“When you get older, you have to develop patience because everything takes longer. I never expected it would take so much longer to do the simple things I’ve done all my life.” – Nancy, age 73

DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS
There are eight dimensions of wellness that influence a person’s ability to function at a healthy level. The dimensions of wellness are:
1. **Physical Wellness** — a lack of illness and/or disability
2. **Emotional Wellness** — an ability to cope and manage stress
3. **Intellectual Wellness** — the ability to think, reason and remember
4. **Social Wellness** — the ability to connect with a support system of family and friends
5. **Occupational Wellness** — the ability to work and/or volunteer
6. **Spiritual Wellness** — a sense of purpose and meaning beyond one’s self
7. **Environmental Wellness** — feeling safe at home and around the community
8. **Financial Wellness** — having sufficient money to meet basic needs

When interacting with older people, consider how reduced levels of wellness may put them at risk and how you can help keep their life in balance. For example:

- A person facing physical, emotional or intellectual challenges may struggle to live independently and meet basic needs.
- A person who is alone and isolated may face social and emotional challenges, increasing the risk for neglect and abuse.

If you sense an older person needs additional support, consider which dimensions of wellness are being most affected. This can help you determine his or her specific needs and how to respond. For example, an older person needing emotional or social support may need a hand to hold and a heart to understand. A person with physical challenges may need help with daily living activities and transportation.

Many older people find it difficult to ask for or accept assistance because of pride or stubbornness. If you sense someone has unmet needs or is neglecting him or herself, call your local agency on aging.

**KEY ISSUES THAT AFFECT FUNCTION:**

**I.M.P.A.C.T.**

**I** is for **IMPAIRMENT**. Conditions such as dementia, Alzheimer's and depression, may cause people to think or act unreasonably. As a result, they may not be safe living alone.

*Suggestion:* If you are concerned a person's mental well-being and overall safety is at risk, consult your management and/or your local agency on aging.

**M** is for **MEMORY**. It is normal to occasionally forget someone’s name or where you put the car keys, but people with memory problems often find it difficult to express their thoughts, solve problems and make decisions. They may struggle when they are in a strange place, faced with new issues or feeling pressured.

*Suggestion:* Slow the pace and try to calm the situation. Stress from feeling hurried tends to make things worse. Break tasks down into smaller parts and deal with issues one at a time. Look and listen for feedback.
**P** is for PHYSICAL. A person’s independence is threatened when mobility becomes a challenge. Stiffening joints, arthritis and reduced flexibility and muscle tone can make movement painful, difficult and unsafe. Stroke and other illnesses may also present mobility challenges.

*Suggestion:* If you see an older person struggling to get around or fumbling for his or her belongings, offer assistance by asking if you can hold or carry something, open a door, or get a chair or motorized scooter, such as those available in many grocery and retail stores. Take the person’s lead and do not force anything.

**A** is for ACCESS. Whether an older person is at home or in the community, the environment can present challenges and safety risks. From pets and area rugs to steps, curbs and uneven surfaces, hazards are everywhere. Slips, trips and falls can lead to serious injury, loss of independence, disability and even death.

*Suggestion:* Look for possible safety risks, such as poor lighting, spills, shiny floors that might appear to be wet, and possible hazards that may cause a person to trip or stumble. Wherever possible, take action to create a safe environment by addressing or removing potential dangers (e.g., poor lighting, insecure handrails, trip hazards such as extension cords, clutter).

**C** is for CLARITY. Many older people have reduced hearing and vision, making it difficult to participate in activities and conversations. For example, the higher-pitched tones of women and children can be difficult to hear, and lighting changes (e.g., from bright light to dim lighting) can make it difficult for aging eyes to adjust and see details.

*Suggestion:* If a person is hard of hearing, reduce background noise, speak louder and slower, and pronounce words more carefully. Ask questions to see if the person you are speaking with is following the conversation. You might also share written information that people can refer to. If vision is a problem, increased lighting and print size can make a difference.

**T** is for TIME. As people age, they tend to take longer to think and perform tasks. Whether due to natural causes, illness or disability, this can be extremely frustrating for them and for others.

*Suggestion:* When people are stressed, their ability to function, think clearly and make decisions is reduced. Be patient! Don’t rush or give them too much, too quickly. When you meet someone, start the conversation with a friendly comment and/or general question to help them relax. Talk and share information in ways older people can participate.

“I’m 80 years old, and I can’t do what I used to. I don’t want people to help or hurry me. I want to do it on my own so please be patient.” – Frederick, age 80

Look for ways you can ‘IMPACT’ independence and help safeguard older people. Do not judge someone by his or her appearance, an illness or injury.
Determine what types of services and support older people can benefit from by recognizing potential limitations. Also important is recognizing and focus on a person’s capabilities. What someone CAN do is equally important to what they can't do.

“We want to do what we can do. In fact you cripple people if you do everything for them.” – Marjorie, age 87

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER
Consider the following as you interact with older people:

1. Just because people are older does not mean they are unable to function independently. Functional ability is different for everyone. Encourage people to do the things they CAN do, and give support to them for the things they cannot do for themselves.

2. If you are concerned an older person has a functional limitation that may put him and her at risk, consult your management and/or local agency on aging.

Locate an Area Agency on Aging
To locate your community’s Area Agency on Aging, visit www.ElderCare.gov. You can search by city, state or ZIP code. You can also visit www.N4A.org and click on “Find your local AAA or Title VI Native American aging program.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION
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