OBJECTIVES
1. To identify life events/transitions likely to affect older people (e.g., diagnosis, loss, retirement, relocation).
2. To discuss challenges associated with significant life events.
3. To select three ways to express care and concern when helping older people.

BACKGROUND
For many people, the “Golden Years” are “Years of Adjustment” as they deal with change. Some changes are expected and easy to cope with, while others shock a person’s sense of stability, such as an unexpected decline in health or the loss of a loved one.

“Moving from my home of 20+ years would be devastating. Imagine being uprooted from where you live. Everything and everyone that’s familiar all of a sudden changes.” – Barbara, age 77

As the LOOK CLOSER, SEE ME poem teaches us, ‘old’ represents more than a single point in time. Being older, ‘seasoned’ or ‘mature’ comprises a lifetime of experiences that define a person’s skills, interests, values, habits and coping styles and shapes their outlook for the future. When interacting with older people, it is important to be sensitive to their personal life experience.

Question: What are some major changes and transitions people are likely to face as they age? Also, how might changes, whether expected or not, be difficult for an older person?

Everyone copes with aging differently. Some changes may be easier to accept than others. For example, arthritis may come on slowly, giving someone the opportunity to prepare and adapt overtime, while being diagnosed with a chronic illness, such as cancer, heart disease or Parkinson’s has been described by some as if “a bomb dropped and every aspect of life was suddenly turned upside down.”

“I retired at age 64... I lost the camaraderie of those I worked with, they were younger than me. I was a little bit angry because my health wasn’t the best, I was resentful and angry.” – Charlie, age 75
Regardless of whether change is expected or not, the way people cope with change varies.

- Imagine being on a fixed income and finding it difficult to make ends meet. Too often, this can make older people vulnerable to scams.
- Imagine how you might react to being lonely and isolated in your home.
- Imagine not being able to do the things you used to do as a result of an injury or illness. Some people will need help with daily activities and personal care. Others may have to give up driving or move from their home.
- Imagine taking on the role of caregiver for a spouse or significant other, seeing his or her health decline, and later dealing with death.
- Imagine family and friends growing impatient or angry with you, neglecting your needs, even abusing or exploiting you.

These examples are NOT to paint a picture that aging is all about loss. Instead, we want to share some real life issues older people may encounter.

“*My husband died 5½ years ago. While I spend time with people every day, there is still a lot of loneliness and an empty house when I come home.*” – Estelle, age 75

There is no way to predict how someone is likely to react or respond to something we do or say. For example an older person might be...

- Too independent, proud or stubborn to ask for help.
- Too embarrassed to admit he/she does not understand what you are saying.
- Too fearful of the unknown to make any changes.
- Uncertain about whom to trust.

Major changes and life transitions older people often experience include:

- Accepting services (e.g., delivered meals).
- Adjusting to an illness.
- Adapting to a device (e.g., cane, hearing aid).
- Becoming a family caregiver.
- Being on a fixed income.
- Changing driving habits or ceasing driving.
- Coping with loneliness.
- Engaging hospice for end-of-life care.
- Finding meaning and purpose after a career.
- Losing a spouse or significant other.
- Moving from a familiar home.
- Needing assistance in the home.

“*Just because you live with people of similar age doesn’t mean you have anything else in common.*” – Jack, age 90

Change and the unknown can be frightening for some, yet offer hope for others. To understand the impact, consider how change affects the body, mind and spirit.
• **BODY** - A disease or disability may limit a person’s functional ability, requiring one or more major lifestyle changes.

• **MIND** - When the ability to think, reason and cope is affected, lifestyle changes may be necessary.

• **SPIRIT** - Change can overwhelm people and break their spirit, affecting every aspect of life and wellness.

As people age, it becomes increasingly challenging to manage daily living activities associated with independent living. From shopping, cleaning and cooking, to managing one’s personal affairs and transportation, life can quickly change.

It takes courage to adapt and survive the many major life changes older people face. The following are thoughts and tips based on the word ‘COURAGE’:

**C.O.U.R.A.G.E**

*C* is for **CAREFULLY** choosing your words. While our intentions may be good, words such as “Trust me” and “It'll be okay” do little to comfort people and can be viewed as insensitive.

*Instead*, say “I’m sorry for your loss,” or “Can you share with me how I may be helpful?”

**O** is for **OUTREACH**. Just because someone does not ask for help does not mean he or she does not want or need it.

*Instead*, reach out and do something. Don’t wait for an invitation; put your good intentions into action. People generally need emotional, informational and instrumental (hands-on) support.

**U** is for **UNDERSTANDING**. Sharing information does not mean an older person understands. Be patient. It may be difficult for someone to accept and act on what you are telling them.

*Instead* engage them, ask questions and support them. Keep in mind that confusion, fear and the lack of understanding often lead to indecision and no change.

**R** is for **RESPECT**. Respect the fact that older people may not share their concerns or take steps to get out of a bad situation.

*Instead* of forcing someone to do something, take time to build some level of trust. Explain how and why sharing their thoughts and feelings may help them accept change and move forward.

**A** is for **ADJUST**. Adjust your expectations. An older person may not respond the same way you would. There are many reasons why people do nothing and accept what we might consider to be unacceptable (e.g., “It’s just the way it is”).
Instead, be helpful while being sensitive to the differences that guide people's values, thinking and behavior. Freedom of choice and being in control tend to be quite important to older people.

G is for GETTING IT. Having an understanding of aging can help you in your interactions with older people. Be careful not to blame the older person for their situation. Know that even when help is needed, it may be refused.

Instead, help an older person be a partner in his or her own survival. Encourage the person to learn how to adjust and cope.

E is for ENGAGE. Engage older people and try understanding what adjusting and adapting to change means to them.

Instead of dwelling on the problem, focus on possible solutions. Encourage people to consider the likely benefits of change and listen to their concerns.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER
We all face change and deal with life decisions differently. It also takes courage to try to understand and be sensitive to older people's concerns while keeping their best interest at heart. Older people have an amazing resiliency. Remind them of the challenges they have overcome throughout their lives. Doing so may boost their confidence and help them accept change and adjust accordingly.