Imagine what it must be like for people to feel as though they do not matter. Imagine being in a restaurant or a professional’s office and feeling invisible. Researchers long ago recognized that living life without feeling noticed or appreciated by others was one of the worst-case scenarios for people of any age.¹

Older people often indicate that they feel “invisible” and unappreciated. In a society that reveres youth and ridicules aging it is human nature to assume aging leads only to failing capabilities and losses. As a result, many people overlook the upside and benefits of aging.

When older adults accept the negative it often results in feelings of diminished self-worth and depressive symptoms. These and other negative emotions reduce quality of life, wellbeing and longevity. A study conducted by researchers at Harvard, Yale and Miami (Ohio) universities found that those who had positive perceptions of aging lived an average of 7.5 years longer than those with cloudier outlooks.² This reinforces the importance of helping people achieve a more positive attitude about aging.

Perhaps stereotypes perceived about older people as behaving grouchy or irritable arise from emotional distress that is experienced and internalized. These behaviors are often incorrectly viewed by seniors, families, or professionals as normal personality changes that accompany aging.

**Risk Factors for Emotional Distress / Dispiritedness**

- Poor physical health
- Compromised function
- Decreased economic resources
- Narrow range of coping skills
- Occurrence of unanticipated events and daily hassles
- Occurrence of several major life events in short time periods
- Weak social supports³

Because feelings and emotions are integral to the holistic nature and are linked to wellbeing, it is important to understand that wellness depends on how people of all ages balance the mind,
body and spiritual dimensions. Emotional wellness involves balancing feelings and managing stress and transitions. However, we understand that for some older adults, age-related changes may increase risk factors that result in additional stressors that overwhelm coping skills and lead to greater vulnerability to negative emotions, dispiritedness, and emotional distress.

**Emotional Vitality**

To help enhance emotional wellness, older adults, families, and professionals need to understand the characteristics linked to “emotional vitality” discovered by researchers which include:

- Feeling happy, enjoying life
- Having a purpose in life
- Feeling hope about the future
- Having a sense of self-acceptance
- Having low measures of anxiety and

Professionals working with older people need to become educated about the risk factors of emotional distress and dispiritedness. We also need to encourage a broad range of positive emotions such as happiness, contentment and gratitude, and discourage negative emotions such as sadness and frustration. When we work with older adults who demonstrate negative emotions and behaviors, we need to provide emotional support, help them recognize their strengths and accomplishments, and motivate them to focus on their own capabilities and possibilities.

If necessary, we need to refer older adults to mental health professionals for life coaching or in-depth assistance to manage their emotional distress in order to enhance their wellness. Research suggests that emotional support and mastery (coping and being able to manage everyday life) are linked to decreased mortality in older adults.

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**Recommended Resources - Evelyn’s Picks**

3. University of Rochester Medical Center. Strong Health is a component of the URMC focus on successful aging. [www.stronghealth.com/services/seniors/healthmatters/emotionalissues.cfm](http://www.stronghealth.com/services/seniors/healthmatters/emotionalissues.cfm)

**References:**

4. Ibid
5. Ibid

GERO GEMS is a publication of the Center for Aging with Dignity (CFAWD). The CFAWD is devoted to keeping people “SAFE After 60” by advocating for, advancing and developing best-practice programs on the safety and mistreatment of older adults. GERO GEMS is written by Evelyn Fitzwater and edited by Charles Puchta. Copyright © 2008 University of Cincinnati.