



**December 2017, Volume 12**

***“Helping Seniors Cope  
with Stress and Anxiety”***

**Older age brings its own set of struggles and sometimes a decreased ability to handle those struggles as easily. Worry and fear can lead a person to experience a feeling of danger which the brain and body respond to by the fight-or-flight instinct. This is called the stress response. Over time, prolonged stress and anxiety in older adults can be associated with increased physical problems, increased health problems, and decreased satisfaction with life.**

Challenges which can cause stress for an older adult can fall into one or more of the following categories:

1. Physical – illnesses, physical limitations, loss of independence

2. Financial – limited income, increased expenses, retirement
3. Mental – cognitive changes, loss of loved ones and grief
4. Relational – caretaking demands, loss of loved ones and grief

**These challenges can cause various signs of stress. Stress can manifest itself through physical complaints such as pain, rashes, sexual dysfunction, or changes in eating habits. Mental signs of stress can include worry, anxiety, or panic attacks, sadness or depression, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, or difficulty concentrating and making decisions. Sometimes individuals may try to cope with stress by drinking too much alcohol, smoking, or misusing drugs.**

**If you are aware that someone you know is showing signs of stress, here are some ways you can help them cope with their feelings in a healthy way:**

**PARTICIPATE – Social events and interacting in the community help build supportive relationships and reduce stress. Spend time in daily exercise.**

**PARTNER – Talk out the cause of stress with a trusted person. Make use of support and education groups. Seek professionals when needed.**

**PLAY – Engage in activities that bring enjoyment. Smiling and laughing are vital to reducing stress. Learn a new hobby. Spend time with a pet.**

**PAUSE – Learn and use relaxation techniques and meditation. Read words of inspiration or enjoyment. Try to get adequate sleep to help**

**the brain recover from stress hormones.**

**POSITIVE – Stay focused on the good things and avoid negative self talk. Look for ways to help others which gives a feeling of well-being.**

**If someone you know has ongoing struggles with stress and worry, a professional should be sought out to assess for depression or anxiety, and to provide therapeutic approaches and other helpful techniques.**

**Other good resources on this topic include AARP's Relax Your Stress Away ([www.aarp.org/health/staying\\_healthy/stress/a2003-03-11-takingtime.html](http://www.aarp.org/health/staying_healthy/stress/a2003-03-11-takingtime.html)) and APA Office on Aging ([www.apa.org/pi/aging/homepage.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/aging/homepage.html))**

### **Activity Tip: Making a Comfort Box**

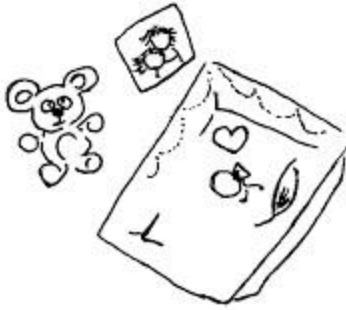
**Making a Comfort Box can help with over-whelming feelings. Sometimes difficult memories or thoughts of wanting to hurt yourself can overwhelm you. When this happens, it helps to have a place to go or imagine going to help you remember about the good stuff in your life, or the things you want to do in the future.**

**If you don't have a plan, it's easy to get lost in the overwhelming feelings. When you have a plan, you can help yourself feel safe.**

**To make a Comfort Box, simply get an empty shoe box or other cardboard box. Next, think of the things that you like to smell, taste, see, hear, and feel. You may be able to put your favorite things right into the box. If they're too big (people, pets, or otherwise), you can use pictures of your favorite things.**

**Below are some ideas to get you thinking about what you might collect**

that will work for you.



### What Should I Put in My Comfort Box?

- **SMELL:** lavender, incense, candles, your favorite aunt's perfume, soap, flowers, bubble bath, freshly cut grass, camp fire, hot chocolate, vanilla, saltwater, garlic, your pet, freshly baked bread. Remember, if you can't package it and put it in the box, any kind of reminder (even a list) will work.
- **TASTE:** chicken noodle soup, your mom's famous casserole, fresh oranges, fried chicken, pears, cookie dough, taffy, cotton candy, warm milk.
- **SIGHT:** photographs of your support people, including friends, family, therapist, school counselor, teachers, foster parents, social worker, etc. Certain colors, or pictures, a drawing of your safe place, pictures of gardens, cottages, stars, laughing babies, and family portraits.
- **SOUND:** your favorite positive music, relaxation tapes, the sound of the ocean in a sea shell, your favorite DVDs, words of affirmation, a tape of your therapist, your mother, or yourself saying calming and soothing

words, evening bird songs, rustling leaves, loud music, love songs, crickets, laughter, a cat's purr, falling rain.

- **TOUCH:** an old blanket from when you were a kid, a piece of your mom's old shirt, a stuffed animal, a letter, a worry stone, brand new socks, flannel.
- **OTHER IMPORTANT STUFF:** names and phone numbers of friends and support people, your personal list of "what to do when I feel like hurting myself," affirmations, special letters or cards, your personal lists of "what makes me happy," "fun and interesting things to do list," and "places to see."



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