



**How
are
you?**

Do yourself some good.

Tips for mental health when you're getting on in years

Feeling good in old age

Staying healthy, both physically and mentally, into old age is something we all want. Good health can't be taken for granted at any age, but it's always possible to do something for our own well-being. This brochure will show you how you can strengthen your mental health well into old age.

Change is a challenge.

Many things change as we get older: the body, the mind, our role in society and our social milieu. Some of these changes are positive, some negative – and many have both benefits and drawbacks. Retirement gives us more time for hobbies, grandchildren and taking on voluntary work, for example – but it also takes away the familiar daily round, together with many social contacts in our working lives.

Advancing age moves living and dying closer together. It becomes more important to come to terms with our own mortality. Our bodies keep imposing new limits on us. We care for family members, we lose those who are close to us. We have to find a way of dealing with these stresses and strains.

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Planning ahead pays off.

Regular exercise, relaxation and a balanced diet all strengthen the body. And similarly, we can also do something for the mind: that helps us to feel at ease and to cope as best we can with the challenges of ageing. But not everything is under our control. No matter how old we are, stress – if it persists or even intensifies – can lead to mental illness. To keep its effects to a minimum, it's important to pick up warning signs at an early stage – and to know where to get the support we need.

Strengthening your mental health

On the following pages you will find a number of ideas for strengthening your mental health. They are intended to encourage reflection, experimentation and dialogue. Some of them will be more effective than others, depending on your personality and your current life situation. Try them out: you'll soon find out what suits you, what does you good, what gives you pleasure.

Challenging times:

This brochure was produced in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. It is precisely at such challenging times, when over-65s are at risk and are sometimes having to live with serious restrictions, that looking after their mental health is especially important. In the brochure you will find a number of ideas that you can put into practice even when opportunities for social contact are limited.

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A healthy lifestyle

Exercise: good for body and soul alike.

Exercise and sport do the body good. A sensible amount of sport and exercise stimulates the heart, the circulation and the metabolism. Strengthening the musculature and balance helps to prevent falls. Exercise is also good for our mental health. Physical activity releases messenger substances which increase our sense of well-being. Exercise and sport also improve mental fitness, memory and perception. We also sleep better. Stress and anxieties are reduced. As a rule of thumb, you should spend around 2½ hours a week on activities that increase your pulse rate: working in the garden, brisk walks, dancing, gymnastics or intensive cleaning. The main thing is that the exercise or sport is right for your needs and your capabilities, and that you enjoy it!

Ideas and services:

Physical and mental exercises (in German, French and Italian):

www.sichergehen.ch > *Zu Hause trainieren*

DO-HEALTH Gruuve is a fortification programme for home use:

usz-microsite.ch/gruuve

Many Swiss communities have a “Cafe Balance” for exercise and social interaction (in German): www.seniorenrhythmik.ch

Exercise programmes and sports courses: www.prosenectute.ch > *Dienstleistungen* > *Freizeit* > *Kantonswahl*. (in German, French and Italian). You can also contact an advisory agency in your area by phone or e-mail. You can find information on the website under “*Beratung* > *Kantonswahl*”.

Tel. 044 283 89 89

Breaks mean balance.

A balance between tension and relaxation is important to your health. It does you good to make sure you take a break every now and again. If you don't get enough sleep at night, take naps – ideally before 3 p.m., and for no more than 20 minutes. Get regular sleep, take walks, do breathing exercises, listen to calming music, meditate – or do whatever you find relaxing. It will increase your energy levels.

Make sure you get a balanced diet.

Eating healthy food that you enjoy does the body and soul good. Enjoying balanced meals evenly throughout the day gives us energy and nutrients. A meal is balanced if it includes carbohydrates for energy, fruit and vegetables for the immune system, protein for muscles and bones, and high-quality lipids for the heart and brain. As we get older the body needs less energy: we often don't feel as hungry and thirsty as we used to. But the body needs just as many nutrients as it did when we were younger. So it's important for your food to contain plenty of nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals and proteins. It's also important to drink plenty of fluids. Reminders like a picture of a teacup or a jug of water on your desk can help to make sure you drink around 1½ to 2 litres of sugar-free water a day.

Enjoying our food does us good.

It's not just what we eat that's important to our well-being: so is how we eat. Even if you only cook for one, treat yourself to something special – and concentrate on enjoying it. Lots of restaurants offer take-aways and home deliveries to help you vary your diet. Dining with a few close friends is especially enjoyable. Issue invitations yourself, and accept them from others. There's no need for the food to be particularly memorable: it's more about enjoying each other's company. You and your friends might organize a regular lunch date, taking it in turns to act as the host.

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Ideas and services:

“Tavolata” is a network of dining clubs where people meet regularly to prepare food and consume it (in German, French and Italian). www.tavolata.ch

Hints on nutrition for older adults from the Swiss Society for Nutrition (in German, French and Italian). www.sge-ssn.ch/alter

Ordering online: the Pro Senectute meals service CasaGusto, Spitex and the EAT.ch restaurant ordering service deliver meals of your choice to your door. casagusto.prosenectute.ch (in German), www.spitex.ch (in German and French), www.eat.ch

Social contacts

Togetherness is good for the health.

Relationships enrich our lives. Family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances form a network that supports us. Experiencing lovely moments together, sharing our thoughts, travelling, doing something together – not only does this make us happy, it keeps the spirit animated and boosts our mental and physical strength.

Friends, family and nodding acquaintances.

Very different sorts of relationship can meet our need to belong, for closeness and support. We decide for ourselves what people we want to meet, and how often. It is well worth maintaining relations with family members and long-standing friends. But it is also helpful to establish new contacts, with no obligations on either side: at a club, at the bus stop, at the family centre.

Refreshing old acquaintanceships.

6 Are there any old contacts that you'd like to refresh? Send an old school friend a greetings card, e-mail a former work colleague recommending a book or a film or inviting them to an event. You may feel like organizing a class reunion. You can do it from home by video, using FaceTime, Skype or Zoom.



Find a useful involvement and approach other people.

One way of getting to know new people is to follow your preferences, skills and interests – and meet others who share them. Many organizations offer group courses, excursions and social occasions. Voluntary work also presents plenty of opportunities to make the most of your skills and life experience. The possibilities are legion: sport, culture, handicrafts, politics, social commitment. Approaching new groups and unknown people takes courage at first, but the pleasure and enrichment that it brings are ample reward. Do you know anybody with a hobby that also interests you? If so, ask them if you can share it with them some time.

Ideas and services:

The Pro Senectute online portal has details of facilities, events and services for senior citizens (in German and French). www.infosenior.ch

The opportunities for voluntary work are endless. Here's a selection: www.benevol.ch (putting volunteers and organizations in touch, in German and French), www.fondation-kiss.ch (neighbourhood aid with time credits, in German), www.prosenectute.ch > *Engagement* > *Freiwilligenarbeit* (in German, French and Italian), www.vitaminb.ch (board membership), www.fiveup.org (volunteer networking app), www.rentarentner.ch (various services from pensioners, in German, French and Italian), www.misgrosi.ch (childcare, in German)

“Sozialkontakt” is an online contact platform that puts people with the same interests and hobbies in touch with each other, free of charge, for shared activities and conversation (in German). sozialkontakt.ch

Telephone chains bring people together when they can't actually meet. Creating a telephone chain of your own doesn't take much time or effort, and it can be highly effective (in German, French and Italian). prosenectute.ch/telefonketten

Mental activity

The brain can be trained too.

Even at an advanced age, it's eminently possible to unleash your creativity and learn new things – and these keep the brain and the mind up to scratch. If you leave familiar paths and try out new things, you actively train the brain – maintaining your flexibility and keeping your mind sharp. Here again, the principle is: training is only good for you if it suits you and you enjoy it, for example playing cards, engaging in amateur dramatics, learning a language, solving puzzles or giving schoolchildren extra tuition.

There is creativity in all of us.

Making music, singing, dancing, painting, writing, cooking, gardening, making or designing things – there are countless ways of being creative. You lose track of time when you're absorbed in this sort of activity. It helps us to express thoughts and feelings that aren't easy to put into words. It doesn't put us under any pressure to perform, it simply gives us pleasure. And pleasure makes us strong. Lots of courses, many of them on painting and music, are also available online.

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Ideas and services:

The Pro Senectute online portal has details of creative and educational courses on subjects such as languages and IT (in German and French). www.infosenior.ch

Inspiration is available online too. The YouTube internet channel, which is free of charge, has countless short films that show you how to set about any conceivable project in the fields of art, zoology, and anything in between. www.youtube.com

Every two years a competition is held for works of literature, science, music and drama by anyone over 70 (in German, French and Italian). www.stiftung-kreatives-alter.ch

The "Kulturlegi" offers discounts on cultural, sporting and education facilities, enabling cardholders to take an active part in society (in German and French). www.kulturlegi.ch

The Pro Senectute advisory agencies can provide persons living on a restricted budget with cultural, educational and sports facilities (in German, French and Italian). www.prosenectute.ch > *Dienstleistungen* > *Beratung* > *Finanzen* > *Kantonsauswahl*

Learning new things brings contentment.

Retirement gives us the opportunity to explore our personal skills and interests in depth: to perfect our culinary arts, to learn how to make our own clothes or breed butterflies, to find out more about physics, history or philosophy. You finally have the time to learn something new, or improve knowledge that you already possess, with no pressure. You are certain to find something that suits you and brings you contentment. The internet offers countless opportunities to conduct your search. If you are not entirely at home with new technologies, take a computer course or ask a close friend or relative for help.

Ideas and services:

“Universities of the third age” make it possible for us to immerse ourselves in new worlds. The Swiss universities publish details of which subjects are on offer and where (in German). www.seniorenstudium.ch

The Swiss library networks maintain an index of all cantonal and municipal libraries, specialist libraries and bookshops (in German). www.bibliothek.ch

Working with the Computerias association, you will help elderly people with their computer problems. It also organizes regular courses and lectures (in German). www.computerias.ch

Pro Senectute offers memory-training courses and “memory meetings”. Go to www.prosenectute.ch > *Dienstleistungen* > *Freizeit*, select your canton, click on “*Bildung*” – and you’re sure to find something suitable.

Talking about it is important

Talking helps. So does asking for help.

“A trouble shared is a trouble halved”: talking to someone about challenges and difficulties reduces stress. Talking also helps to get things into perspective, and solutions often emerge in dialogue. It does us good when somebody listens to us and takes an interest. But we sometimes find it hard to ask for help, and to talk about our problems.

An act of strength.

What stops us asking for support? Are we afraid of being rejected? Would we prefer not to be in anybody’s “debt”? Whatever the reason, it sometimes takes a little courage to confide in a friend or acquaintance, or to ask for help.

Being there for one another!

10 Seeking a conversation in order to change something about your situation is a sign of strength. Being there for one another, supporting one other, creates a purpose in life and strengthens a relationship. You are surely familiar with the role of the helper, knowing from your own experience that giving makes you feel good – and is at least as important as accepting help. So whoever you ask for help also benefits.

If you notice that somebody you know is having difficulties, you may feel inhibited about broaching the subject. There’s one thing you should be sure of: to be approached, or to make the approach yourself, doesn’t just do you good: it’s the essential first step towards help and improvement! What matters is that you encourage the person to talk about it, not insist that they must. Show sympathy and understanding, and don’t rush into giving hasty advice.



Conversation tips.

It's not easy to talk about personal difficulties.

At www.how-are-you.ch you will find very specific tips on how to have a fruitful discussion about mental stress. Here are two examples of how to break the ice.

Hints for starting conversations:

- **If you're the one feeling stressed:** "I have a few problems at the moment, it would be nice if somebody would lend me an ear."
- **If you notice changes in an acquaintance:** "I get the feeling that things aren't going well for you at the moment. Am I right about that? Would you like to talk to me about it? Today, maybe, or some other time?"

Conversation tips from the www.how-are-you.ch website are also available in a brochure, which you can order on the website.

Sometimes it does you good to talk to strangers about your problems.

Ideas and services:

People with the same problem or in similar life situations exchange notes (in German, French and Italian): www.selbsthilfes Schweiz.ch

There are "Grief cafés" (Trauercafes) all over Switzerland. They are there for anybody who is grieving, regardless of the nature of their loss and how long ago it happened.

Die Dargebotene Hand / La Main Tendue foundation offers an open ear 24/7 (in German, French and Italian): phone 143.

Aids to communication.

As we get older, bodily limitations can make it harder to communicate: if your vision or hearing is impaired, talking about things is more difficult. This is why vision and hearing aids are important.

Taking mental stress seriously

There may come a point at which talking to your family and friends is no longer enough on its own. If mental stress persists for an extended period, it's important to get professional help.

Mental stress can lead to mental illness.

The suggestions on the preceding pages show how you can look after your mental health – but not everything is under our control. If the stresses of ageing get on top of you, your mental health may suffer. Mental illness can affect anyone, and it may not occur until we get older. The most common post-retirement mental illnesses include depression, panic attacks, dementia and addictive disorders, which affect almost a quarter of all elderly people.

Treatment is possible.

12 Mental illnesses are eminently treatable. Correct treatment can alleviate complaints, or even make them disappear. Psychotherapeutic consultations are often beneficial, and depending on the nature of the stress and the individual's personal situation, it can be useful to combine them with medicine. There are other possible treatments. The sooner we get professional help, the more successful the treatment is likely to be.



Interpreting complaints correctly.

If we are to seek professional help in good time, we need to understand the warning signs. It's important to know that mental illnesses, especially depressions, are often not detected in the elderly because their complaints are seen as normal symptoms of growing old, and they often take bodily form. That's not helpful, because depression in the elderly is eminently treatable – leading to the restoration of their quality of life to former levels. So it is all the more important for us to recognize the warning signs of mental illnesses in ourselves or those close to us at an early stage, and to seek specialist assistance.

Take signs seriously.

If you have felt downcast or apathetic for an extended period, if you no longer take an interest or pleasure in anything, if you can't sleep or have lost your appetite – tell your doctor. Put the question directly: "Might I be depressed, or have some other mental illness?" Only careful investigation and diagnosis can rule out other illnesses, thus making the correct treatment possible. Mental illnesses should be treated by specialist psychotherapists and psychiatrists. NB: if you feel you are not being taken seriously, you might consider obtaining a second opinion from another specialist. Practitioners specializing in mental illnesses in the elderly are known as gerontopsychologists and gerontopsychiatrists.

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The same applies if you feel increasingly forgetful or confused, if you have difficulties with language or orientation – leaving you less able to cope with day-to-day life. These symptoms may be precursors of dementia, or they may indicate depression. Once again it's helpful to be quite specific to your doctor: "I'm afraid I may be suffering from dementia. I'd like to be examined by a specialist to find out."

At www.how-are-you.ch > addresses and services you will find information on specialist psychotherapists and other helpful addresses.

Positive outlook on life

Getting older means that at some stage we all grow weaker, physically and mentally. The end of life is approaching. This is a great mental challenge, and a positive outlook on life helps us to face it.

Accepting ourselves and growing old.

Even if we can remain active physically and mentally, life is not always perfect. Our breadth of experience means that we know our strengths, and how we can cope with stress. We know that after a period of grief and adjusting to new circumstances, good times return. This comforting knowledge helps us to face challenges more calmly.

Saying yes to life.

Accepting ourselves and life, with all its restrictions and losses, can bring relief. But this doesn't mean that you should resign yourself to being unable to change things in your life over which you still have some control, and where change is worth fighting for. Instead it is about:

- accepting our mortality,
- abandoning unrealizable goals and hopes,
- forgiving those who have affronted us.



Train yourself to think positively.

“Old age is an imposition! The body starts to fail, we lose people we love, and we have to face our own mortality.” If we fixate only on what no longer works properly and what we are losing, frustration and sadness are inevitable. But if we also focus on the things that still function well and on those that only come with advanced age, we can take pleasure in life and draw strength from them. So you should regularly ask yourself: **What have I succeeded in doing today? What doesn't hurt at the moment? What has given me pleasure?**

Ideas and services:

One possibility of self-reflection is writing autobiographical notes.

At “story-telling cafes” (Erzählcafés) people can look back on their lives, discovering their own strengths and immersing themselves in the lives of others (in German and French): www.netzwerk-erzaehlcafe.ch

What are you grateful for in life? Writing these things down gives them weight and presence. Thank-you letters can be addressed to recipients and sent to them – and they can also be addressed to oneself, or to destiny.



More information at www.how-are-you.ch

- Suggestions for mental health care
- Conversation tips for people affected and those around them
- Addresses for getting professional help and further support

Professional help

Mental illnesses should be treated as early as possible by qualified specialists. You should confide in your family doctor, who will be able to recognize mental illnesses and refer you to a specialist psychotherapist. If you prefer to make a direct approach to a specialist, you will find their addresses at www.how-are-you.ch > *Addresses and services*

Advice on mental stress

The Pro Mente Sana **advice line**: Tel. 0848 800 858
(in German, standard charge).

Emergencies: Die Dargebotene Hand / La Main Tendue advice line: tel. 143
(24/7, in German, French and Italian, free of charge, anonymous).

16 Advice and information on all aspects of growing old

Advice, information, events and courses:
www.prosenectute.ch / tel. 044 283 89 89
Regional facilities: www.infosenor.ch

Order or download brochures

At www.how-are-you.ch > *More about the campaign* > *Order brochures* you can order or download further copies of this brochure, a general brochure on mental health and illnesses, a brochure on mental health and illnesses in the family, two brochures on mental health at work, and a brochure containing tips on how to conduct talks.

Campaign partners:

Cantons and pro mente sana



On behalf of:

Gesundheitsförderung Schweiz
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