



How Behavioral Health Programs Can Improve Assisted Living Facilities

Create a mentally strong and healthy community for your residents
with a comprehensive, in-person, and medicare accepted
behavioral health program

Introduction



Mental health and behavioral health issues became daily conversation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. People of all ages and situations struggled with uncertainty, loss, and a new way of living due to restrictions and shutdowns across the world.

But while we were all affected by the pandemic, people living in nursing homes or assisted living facilities were in a particularly vulnerable situation. Concerns over resident's health and wellbeing led to restricted visits and less opportunities to socialize for a part of the population that already suffers from reduced social contact.

As the pandemic progressed and vaccines became available, some restrictions were lifted. However, living so long in isolation and uncertainty has left behind invisible scars.

At the same time, the population of assisted living facilities continues to grow across the United States. This increase, along with a longer life expectancy, makes it clear that ensuring a high quality of life for residents of assisted living facilities is essential.

Behavioral healthcare is the key to that.



Behavioral Health vs. Mental Health



The terms behavioral health and mental health are often used interchangeably. While closely related, they are not the same, and it is worth understanding the distinction when considering how to best support assisted living residents.

Behavioral health covers an individual's daily habits and how those habits might affect their mental wellbeing. It includes biology, behavior, and emotions. The goal is to achieve a balance between physical and psychological health.

Cultivating habits that prevent disease or manage existing conditions help to achieve that balance, and can also help treat injuries and illnesses. **Healthy eating and regular exercise are two foundations of good behavioral health**, but during the pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions significantly limited access to these habits. Residents had to stay in their rooms or apartments within assisted living facilities, making strolls outside impossible. While some used online exercise classes, others stopped exercising altogether.

Mental health, on the other hand, takes a different approach. Rather than focusing on behaviors, it considers a person's state of mind. Behaviors are one of the strongest influencers of an individual's mental health. However, the opposite is also true. A person's state of mind can determine their behavior.

Mental health has a strong connection to people's decisions and how they act. To understand a person's state of mind, mental health professionals consider biological factors and a person's environment. As a term, mental health falls under behavioral health, but it has a more comprehensive approach.

Understanding someone's state of behavioral health starts by recognizing that an individual's reactions to the same scenario will differ. Even those experiencing the same or similar emotions can have different reactions. Most people experienced stronger feelings of uncertainty and fear throughout the pandemic than expected. Residents in assisted living facilities are no exception to that.

Establishing strong, positive behavioral health habits is fundamental to dealing with those emotions.

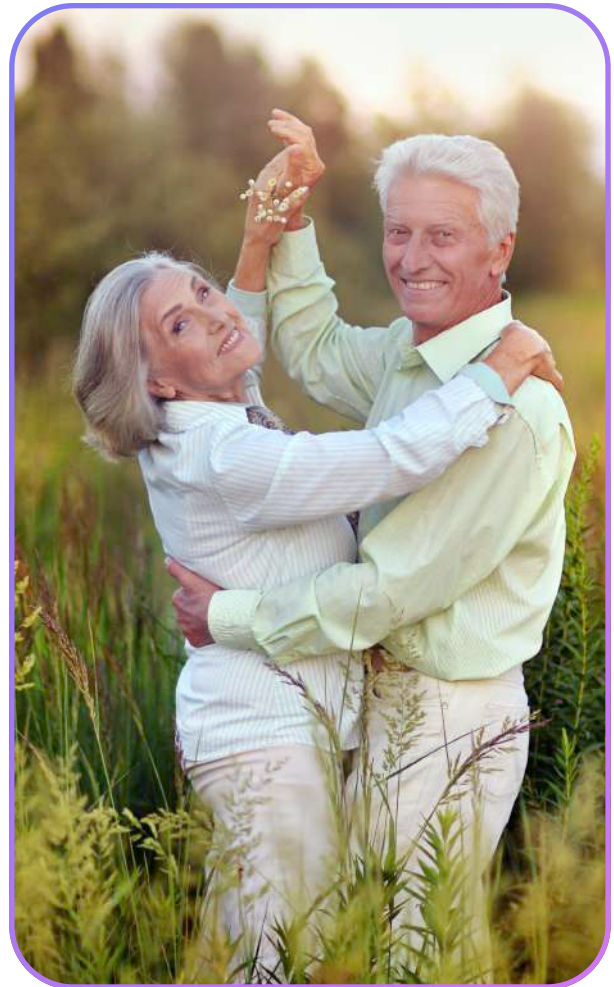
Foundations of Behavioral Care in Assisted Living



Behavioral healthcare is a fundamental aspect of the care and services offered by assisted living facilities. While some residents may arrive with established habits, others require assistance. Moreover, the transition from living entirely independently to moving into a residential facility will likely impact residents' behavioral and mental health. Therefore, assisted living facilities need to make behavioral healthcare a priority.

Any facility that offers behavioral care needs a structured program to base its services. A strong program is essential to support those residents who already have a mental health diagnosis, but it's perhaps even more critical as a preventative measure. Assisting residents with their transition into assisted living can prevent severe mental health problems before they arise.

Preventing mental illness through a behavioral health program is an excellent way to ensure residents' high quality of care and life. Having a structured program in place helps your staff deliver this type of care in an organized and efficient manner.



Structured behavioral healthcare programs are run by staff trained for mental health needs. These team members know the residents' rights, and they make sure those rights are respected and encouraged. Ensuring each employee receives behavioral healthcare training is essential for securing continuity of care.

Foundations of Behavioral Care in Assisted Living



Positive reinforcement is vital in behavioral care. This starts by treating the resident more as a client than a patient. When residents are involved in developing their treatment plan they are far more likely to voluntarily follow and meet set objectives, compared to treatments that they feel have been imposed upon them.



Offering a range of activities to residents is critical for successful behavioral healthcare programs. Staying busy and participating in enjoyable activities is essential for stable mental health. It allows people to keep their mind occupied, and offers opportunities for residents to socialize with others. Both factors are incredibly healthy for residents who may suffer from a mental health-related illness.

Movement is also important to maintain health. Any form of exercise improves mental health by reducing anxiety, depression, and negative moods. Even a gentle walk improves self-esteem and cognitive function.

Mental stability is the key to an improved quality of life. Providing this high level of care in an assisted living facility often works best when a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner (PMHNP) leads the behavioral health program. This nurse practitioner manages all mental health medications and can even prescribe those medications as needed.

Instead of leaving the community to visit a mental health clinic, residents can see the practitioner on-site and immediately address their medications or other concerns. This cuts down on hospital and clinic visits and gives residents more time to enjoy life.

The Impact of Behavioral Health Problems on Assisted Living Facilities



Assisted living facilities are built on a community-based philosophy. Residents who are fit and healthy can enjoy an independent life, but will always have access to medical and other support when it's needed. Those who are becoming frail or are suffering from various conditions have around-the-clock access to help. And seniors living alone can easily find a support system and companionship.

In the United States, there are currently just under 40 million people above 65. Out of those seniors, 1.5 million live in nursing homes, and approximately 1 million live in assisted living facilities. These numbers are projected to increase dramatically over the next 20 years. As the baby boomer generation ages, experts predict that the number of seniors will double by 2050.

While the percentage of people over 65 living in nursing homes has declined steadily over the past 20 years, assisted living has gained in popularity. This trend will likely continue as the number of people over 65 increases. Consequently, the need for structured behavioral healthcare in assisted living facilities will also grow.

The appeal of assisted living is clear. While nursing homes are focused on providing necessary medical care, assisted living facilities have a different purpose. Its community-based, social environment is well suited to ease the transition from working life to retirement. However, not every assisted living facility is equipped to deal with the growing need for mental health care as residents age.



Assisted living staff members are not always full-time licensed nurses, and even fewer hold specific mental health-related qualifications. As a result, it can be difficult for a facility to ensure a high standard of living and quality of care when faced with behavioral health issues.

Addressing Depression in Assisted Living Facilities



Discussing mental health concerns has become more commonplace. For many, the coronavirus pandemic removed some of the stigma attached to seeking help for psychological challenges.



In the past, dealing with mental health concerns in assisted living facilities has been a challenge for medical and care staff. One of the most common mental health disorders is depression. While this illness affects Americans of all ages, it can be hard to identify in seniors due to differing symptoms. Patients with depression in other age groups report low moods, sadness, or crying spells.

Older adults with depression who are not affected by dementia present with fatigue, disrupted sleep patterns, and even anorexia. Studies have shown that depression is the most common cause of unwanted weight loss after 65. In addition, there may be other symptoms that can seem unrelated. Headaches or abdominal pain are common, as well as gastrointestinal issues. Those affected might also struggle to concentrate or report not feeling well.

Addressing depression has become the key to ensuring a high quality of life for residents. However, it may be challenging to recognize the symptoms as something other than an upset stomach or a persistent headache without specially trained staff.

This is no reflection of the team but simply shows the difficulty of making a diagnosis. It's also why an effective and successful behavioral health program needs to be led by qualified personnel.

Depression and Dementia

Depression becomes even harder to diagnose when residents develop dementia. As the disease progresses, it impairs communication between medical staff and patients more and more. Describing feelings or emotions can become almost impossible. Some of the symptoms of depression and dementia can overlap and require a specialist to be correctly diagnosed.

Another challenge is the lack of reliable, peer-reviewed research specific to this older age group. Despite these limitations, there is evidence that using exercise-based interventions and reducing social isolation have promising results. This is what behavioral healthcare excels at—creating opportunities for residents to connect and to develop sustainable, positive habits.

While it's too early to see the consequences of the increased isolation caused by the pandemic, it's safe to assume that more assisted living residents may need support over the coming years.

Depression and Anxiety

Out of all those diagnosed with depression, 65% also show anxiety symptoms. Today, second-generation antidepressants like SSRIs have become the primary treatment of depression and anxiety for those of all ages.

However, there are some differences in the results of SSRI treatment for older adults. Elderly individuals tend to respond more slowly to antidepressant treatment and have to wait longer to benefit from the effects of the medication. But despite this delay, their quality of life improved substantially, with reports including better sleep, renewed enthusiasm, and improved mental health overall.



How Behavioral Health Counseling Can Help



Treating depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions often involves several approaches. Apart from medication, psychotherapy or counseling has produced promising results.

Behavioral health counseling should be a core part of any behavioral healthcare program in an assisted living facility. Not only can behavioral health counseling services provide a safe environment for understanding the root of the issue, it can also help those struggling find the necessary support system. Plus, counseling can help develop the knowledge required for better decision-making and coping in the future.

Moving into an assisted living facility marks a massive transition in any person's life. Like moving out of the family home for the first time, this move signals that a person is making a significant life change - in this case they may be entering the last chapter of their life. This is why many seniors need support with this transition.

Counseling is a great way to address the emotions triggered by the transition.

Working with a mental health professional helps assisted living residents through the changes they are experiencing and offers tools to understand their emotions. Good behavioral health is based on healthy habits, but moving disrupts habits and routines. It's hard to go on a walk when you know your apartment remains full of unpacked boxes. Few people would invite their neighbors over for a cup of coffee when their home is in a state of disarray.

Even with the best intentions, most people find their healthy habits disrupted by a significant change. Assisted living facilities can address this challenge with practical help and counseling.

Counseling creates a support system and helps residents cope with a new diagnosis, whether for a physical or a mental condition. Showing seniors a path towards dealing with new challenges positively impacts their quality of life. It may also pave the way towards accepting more help as this becomes necessary over time.

Summary and Conclusion



The stigma around mental health and behavioral health is starting to break down due to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. No one was more affected by the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus than seniors, especially the residents of assisted living facilities.

Introducing behavioral healthcare programs into assisted living communities can transform the lives of residents by:

- ♥ Assisting with the transition to assisted living
- ♥ Helping with the effects of physical illness
- ♥ Addressing the consequences of mental illness
- ♥ Creating opportunities to socialize and find new interests
- ♥ Offering counseling support

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