Baby boomers and mental health



Following WWII, people around the world settled down to enjoy peace and prosperity – and raise families. From 1946 to 1964, the largest generation in history was created – the Baby Boomers. Because of their sheer numbers, the Boomers radically changed society at every stage of their lives and now that they're in their 60s and early 70s they're redefining old age – and facing some significant mental health challenges.

Who are the Boomers?

Boomers grew up in an era when mental health issues where not discussed, much less acknowledged. Conditions such as anorexia, bulimia, ADHD, PTSD, autism, and learning disabilities were unheard of and depression and anxiety were viewed as signs of weakness. Boomers were, and are, accustomed to toughing things out and not asking for help when things get difficult.

But their attitudes toward mental toughness do not make them immune to mental illnesses. Current statistics show that 25 percent of people over 55 experience some form of mental health issue but many go undiagnosed or untreated (especially men). The most common mental health issues for people over 50 are:

- **Depression.** Risk factors include chronic physical illness and/or pain, diminishing physical functioning, grief and loss, and medications.
- **Anxiety disorders.** Traumatic events, social isolation, medical issues, financial concerns and/or impaired memory can increase anxiety in older adults.
- **Dementia.** Age, high blood pressure, diabetes, strokes, sedentary lifestyle, head injury, and alcohol abuse are all factors in the development of dementia. After 65, the likelihood of developing some form of dementia increases every five years and by age 85, more than 50 percent of people are affected.
- **Substance abuse or misuse.** According to the Institute of Medicine, an estimated 14 to 20 percent of seniors have one or more mental health conditions resulting from misuse or abuse of medications, alcohol or other substances.

There's another factor affecting the mental health of many Boomers: caregiving. Because of advances in medicine and better living conditions, people are living longer and more and more Boomers find themselves caring for elderly parents, often in their 90s. Boomers may think they can do it all, even as they enter their senior years, but a lifetime of doing so is putting their physical – and certainly mental -- health at risk.

The good news is that while Boomers are notorious for neglecting their mental health, their children, the Millennials, are not. Thanks to a younger generation that openly discusses mental health and demands more resources, Boomers are realizing that it's okay to seek help for emotional trauma and that mental illnesses are legitimate, treatable and manageable. They're following the lead of their Millennial children and accessing the information and support available through their Employee Assistance Program and other resources. By doing so, Boomers continue to demonstrate their generation's adaptability to change.