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FOCUS ON MENTAL HEALTH IN AGING ADULTS VITAL, K-STATE EXPERT SAYS

MANHATTAN — For aging adults, maintaining physical health is extremely important to preserving quality of life. What older adults may not realize, however, is that mental health is equally vital for successful aging, said Janice Dinkel, coordinator of the social work program at Kansas State University.

"We need to 'use it or lose it' when it comes to our mental skills as well as our physical ones," said Dinkel, associate professor of sociology, anthropology and social work.

Dinkel said although some mental abilities may not be as sharp for older adults as they were in their younger years, most of these changes don't typically have a noticeable impact on everyday activities. Although Dinkel said mental disorders are not part of normal aging, mental health problems such as dementia, depression, addiction and anxiety disorders can occur in older adults.

Later life does offer many opportunities for enjoyment, including traveling and spending time on hobbies and with family and friends, but older adults may also experience periods of higher stress because of retiring to a new location, a health crisis or widowhood, she said.

"For others, especially the frail and isolated, later life can be a time of considerable and often persistent stress," Dinkel said. "They may experience loss of mobility, financial insecurity, physical dependence and loss of relationships with family and friends."

Dinkel suggests the following tips for aging and good mental health:

- * DO be flexible and learn to adapt to changing circumstances.
- * DO use your mind and stay active.
- * DON'T abuse prescription or over-the-counter medications, such as tranquilizers, sleeping pills or alcohol.
- * DO get regular physical checkups.
- * DO set goals for yourself and work toward them.
- * DO check your general attitude — is it positive or negative? Have you laughed recently?

(more)

- * DO exercise regularly, eat nutritiously and get adequate sleep.
- * DO avoid isolating yourself — it's a breeding ground for depression.
- * DO learn and know signs of depression — it is treatable.
- * DO develop and maintain good relationships with others for support.

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