Mental Health Crisis Support and Older Adults: Perceptions of the 988 Lifeline

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INSTITUTE FOR HEALTHCARE POLICY AND INNOVATION
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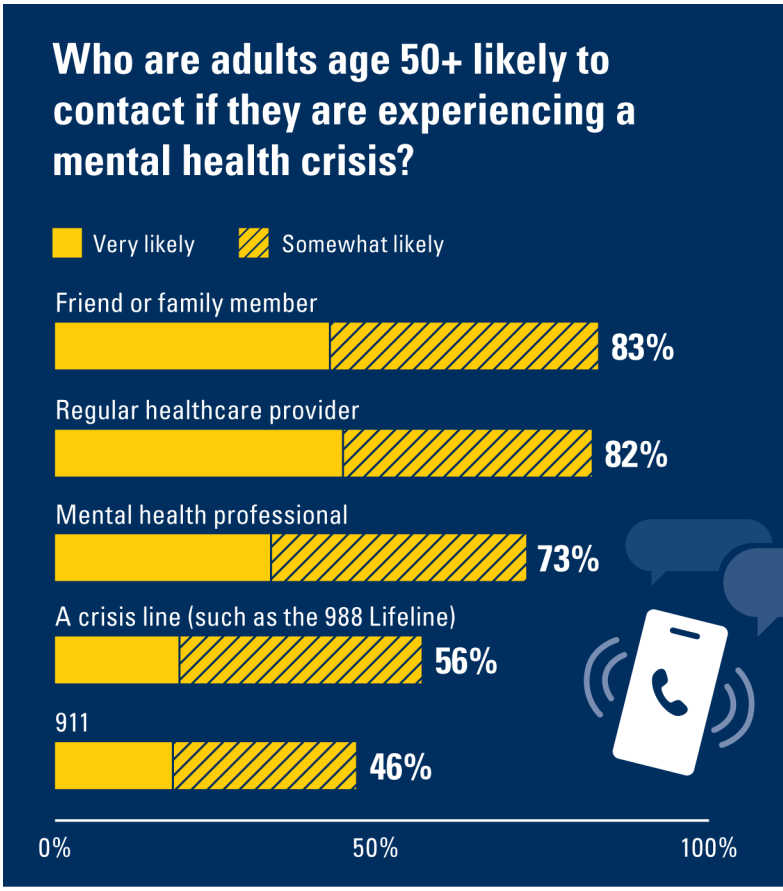
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Key Findings

- If experiencing a mental health crisis, the majority of U.S. adults age 50 and older said they are very or somewhat likely to contact a friend or family member (83%), their regular healthcare provider (82%), a mental health professional (73%), or a crisis line (56%).
- Although 56% of older adults say they would be likely to use a crisis line during a mental health emergency, 69% had not heard of the 988 Lifeline before taking the survey.
- 49% of older adults reported at least one concern with contacting the 988 Lifeline or another crisis line if they were experiencing a mental health crisis, with privacy as the top concern (26%).



Four years ago, the federally mandated 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline was launched across the U.S. Available 24 hours a day 365 days per year to anyone with phone or internet access, counselors at crisis call centers respond to calls, texts, and online chats from individuals facing mental health challenges, emotional distress, or substance use concerns, or who just need someone to talk to. People can also reach out to the 988 Lifeline if they are concerned about someone else who might need crisis support.

In September 2025, the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging asked a national sample of adults age 50 and older about their mental health, actions taken to support their mental health, sources of support during a crisis, and experiences with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. This report summarizes their responses and contains information about mental health crises, including suicide. For some individuals, this topic may bring up strong emotions. We encourage readers to take care of their mental health and seek support if needed. Immediate help is available: call or text 988, or chat online at 988lifeline.org.

Mental health status and actions taken to support mental health

Overall, 89% of adults age 50 and older rated their mental health as good or better (20% excellent, 41%

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very good, and 28% good), whereas 11% rated their mental health as fair or worse (9% fair and 2% poor).

In all, 32% of adults age 50 and older said they have done at least one of the following for their mental health in the past year:

- Talked with a friend or family member (21%)
- Talked with their regular healthcare provider (16%)
- Had an appointment with a mental health provider (12%)
- Talked with someone in their religious community (3%)
- Used a mental health app on their phone or tablet (2%)
- Contacted a crisis line by call, text, or chat (1%)

Potential sources of support during mental health crises

If experiencing a mental health crisis, adults age 50 and older reported that they are very or somewhat likely to contact:

- a friend or family member (83%)
- their regular healthcare provider (such as a primary care doctor or nurse) (82%)
- a mental health professional (such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, clinical social worker, or licensed therapist) (73%)
- a crisis line (such as the 988 Lifeline, Crisis Text Line, Trevor Project, Veterans Crisis Line, or another crisis line offered by a city, county, state, or mental health organization) (56%)
- 911 (46%)
- someone in their religious community (37%)
- another source (42%)

Adults who do not have friends or family to depend on for support with their daily needs were less likely than those with such support to say they would reach out to a mental health professional (62% no support vs. 76% with support) or crisis line (47% no support vs. 59% with support) if they were experiencing a mental health crisis. In addition, men were less likely than women to report that they would seek support from a mental health professional (68% men vs. 77% women) or their regular healthcare provider (79% men vs. 85% women) in a time of crisis.

Many adults age 50+ have not heard of a mental health crisis hotline, including the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

31%
have never heard of any crisis line

69%
have never heard of the 988 Lifeline

Experiences with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

In 2022, 988 was launched nationally as the three-digit dialing or texting code for the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The 988 Lifeline offers free, confidential, 24/7 access to trained crisis counselors who can help people experiencing mental health-related distress, or support those worried about someone else who may need crisis support.

Familiarity with the 988 Lifeline

The majority of adults age 50 and over (69%) had never heard of the 988 Lifeline before taking the survey. A smaller percentage (31%) said they had never heard of any crisis hotline. Men were more likely to say they had never heard of 988 or any other crisis hotline (35% men vs. 27% women), as were Hispanic adults compared with White adults (46% Hispanic vs. 27% White).

Use of the 988 Lifeline

Among adults age 50 and older who had heard of 988, only 4% reported having ever contacted the crisis line—2% did so for themselves and 2% did so for someone else. Those more likely to have ever contacted 988 included adults age 50–64 (6% age 50–64 vs. 1% age 65+), individuals with disabilities that limit day-to-day activities (9% disabilities vs. 1% no disabilities), and adults who felt isolated (8% some of the time or often vs. 2% hardly ever) or a lack of companionship (7% some of the time or often vs. 2% hardly ever). People who rated their mental health as fair or poor reported contacting 988 at similar rates as those who said their mental health is excellent, very good, or good.

Comfort with contacting the 988 Lifeline

After giving a description of the 988 Lifeline, the poll asked all adults age 50 and over how comfortable they would feel contacting 988 if they or someone they knew was experiencing a mental health crisis. Overall, 75% would feel at least somewhat comfortable (31% very comfortable or 44% somewhat comfortable), whereas 25% would feel at least somewhat uncomfortable (19% somewhat uncomfortable or 6% very uncomfortable). Women were more likely to say they would feel very or somewhat comfortable contacting the 988 Lifeline (81% women vs. 68% men), as were people who live alone (79% live alone vs. 73% live with others).

Concerns with contacting the 988 Lifeline

About half of older adults (49%) reported at least one concern with contacting the 988 Lifeline or another crisis line if they were experiencing a mental health crisis. The most cited concerns were privacy (26%), feeling embarrassed or ashamed (16%), and worry that contacting a crisis line could lead to an emergency department visit or hospitalization (15%) or the police getting involved (14%). In addition, 13% said they do not think contacting a crisis line would help, 12% said they are worried about potential financial costs, and 8% expressed concern about wait times until reaching a real person.

What would make older adults more likely to use the 988 Lifeline?

When the poll asked older adults about factors that would make them more likely to contact the 988 Lifeline or another crisis line if experiencing a mental health crisis, 40% said remaining anonymous and 40% said being able to talk or text with a crisis counselor immediately. Other responses included speaking with someone trained to work with people with specific backgrounds (18%) and reaching someone from their state or local area (17%).

Implications

This poll shows that, although more than half of U.S. adults age 50 and older say they would consider using a crisis line during a mental health emergency, awareness of the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline remains limited among this population. Unlike suicide rates among adolescents and younger adults, which have declined more than expected since the launch of the 988 Lifeline, research shows that suicide rates among older adults have not declined as much in that same timeframe. These findings underscore both the potential of the 988 Lifeline and the importance of raising awareness of 988 among older adults and identifying and responding to barriers that may prevent them from using the crisis line.

Older adults' leading concern about contacting crisis lines like the 988 Lifeline is privacy, which may deter individuals from engaging with these services. People who contact the 988 Lifeline are not required to give personal information to receive support. The 988 Lifeline provides a description of how they approach confidentiality on their website, emphasizing that they will not share any identifiable information about callers, chat users, and texters without their consent, unless immediate action is needed to save someone's life—which is rare. Only in these rare instances—when the caller is unable or unwilling to work together on a safety plan and the crisis counselor feels the caller will harm themselves imminently—does the 988 Lifeline dispatch emergency services, such as 911 responders, law enforcement, or mobile crisis teams (when available). Public awareness campaigns could educate older adults about the 988 Lifeline and help counter privacy and other concerns about contacting the 988 Lifeline for oneself or others.

Public awareness initiatives related to the 988 Lifeline can also help people know what to expect when reaching out to the Lifeline more generally, potentially increasing use. For example, many older adults in this poll said that being able to talk to a crisis counselor immediately would make them more likely to use the 988 Lifeline. Knowing that they can expect a quick response (in March 2026, callers to 988 waited 35 seconds on average before their call was answered) may encourage individuals to use the 988 Lifeline when needed. In addition, the 988 Lifeline is free to use and available in several languages, including American Sign Language (ASL). Ultimately, the usefulness of crisis lines could be improved if older adults have accurate information regarding the service and recognize that the support offered is confidential, accessible, and helpful.

The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline was designed to be an easy-to-reach and low-barrier resource for support during a mental health crisis. However, to be maximally effective, individuals—particularly those at greatest risk and their loved ones—need to be aware of this resource and willing and able to use it in times of crisis. Many older adults either do not know, or have concerns, about using the 988 Lifeline. Targeted initiatives can help increase awareness and comfort with the 988 Lifeline among older adults, which can support better mental health outcomes overall.

Data Source and Methods

This National Poll on Healthy Aging report presents findings from a national household survey conducted exclusively by NORC at the University of Chicago for the University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. This survey module on mental health and the 988 Lifeline was administered online and by phone in September 2025 to a randomly selected, stratified group of U.S. adults age 50–95 (n=2,379). The survey completion rate was 51% among panel members invited to participate. The margin of error is ± 1 to 3 percentage points for questions asked of the full sample that received this module and higher among subgroups. Percentages in this report may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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Read past National Poll on Healthy Aging reports and about the poll methodology.

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National Poll on Healthy Aging Team

Jeffrey Kullgren, MD, MS, MPH
Director

Erica Solway, PhD, MPH, MSW
Deputy Director

Scott Roberts, PhD
Associate Director

Mark Ilgen, PhD
Faculty Collaborator

Kevin Saulnier, PhD
Faculty Collaborator

Matthias Kirch, MS
Data Lead

Nicholas Box, MPA
Data Analyst

Sydney Strunk, MPH
Research Specialist

Emily Smith, MA
Multimedia Designer

The Regents of the University of Michigan
Jordan B. Acker (Huntington Woods), Michael J. Behm (Grand Blanc), Mark J. Bernstein (Ann Arbor), Paul W. Brown (Ann Arbor), Sarah Hubbard (Okemos), Denise Ilitch (Birmingham), Carl J. Meyers (Dearborn), Katherine E. White (Ann Arbor), Domenico Grasso (ex officio)

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