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Managing the Effects of Social Distancing in Older Adults During COVID-19

Behavioral Health Guidance and Resources for Older Adults Residing in Nursing Homes, Long-term Care Facilities, or Assisted Living Facilities

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 43 percent of adults 60 years or older in the United States reported feeling lonely¹. While current social distancing guidance is in place for senior living facilities to protect the health of the residents, it is important to understand the behavioral health implications of social distancing and isolation on facility residents. Further, while the majority of older adults live in the community, it's important to note that this guidance is intended for older adults residing in long-term care facilities².

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is recommended that older adults follow social distancing [guidance](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A few examples from this guidance includes that assisted living facilities restrict visitors, regularly check healthcare workers and residents for fevers and symptoms, and limit activities within the facility to keep residents safe. Additional guidance from the CDC can be found [here](#) on considerations when preparing Assisted Living Facilities for COVID-19. Social isolation, especially in older adults, may bring a higher likelihood of psychological and medical effects compared to younger adults. Some of these psychological and medical effects include but are not limited to high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, anxiety, and depression³. The following guidance and resources are for assisted living facility staff, and the caretakers and family members of residents living in assisted living facilities to help reduce the negative effects of social distancing during COVID-19.

Potential Impact of Social Distancing on Older Adults

The outbreak of COVID-19 may be especially stressful for older adults and may contribute to increased feelings of loneliness⁴. The CDC has provided information on [Stress and Coping](#) during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has also provided a fact sheet on [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health](#). According to CDC, symptoms of stress include:

- Fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones
- Changes in appetite or sleeping, feelings of hopelessness, difficulty concentrating; these may also mimic symptoms of depression
- Worsening of chronic health problems
- Worsening of mental health conditions
- Increased use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs
- Anger, uncertainty, or frustration
- Increased somatic complaints

¹The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. The Health and Medical Dimensions of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults. <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/the-health-and-medical-dimensions-of-social-isolation-and-loneliness-in-older-adults>*

² Institute of Medicine of The National Academies. Providing Healthy and Safe Foods As We Age, Workshop Summary. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK51841/>*

³National Institute on Aging. Social Isolation, Loneliness in Older People Pose Health Risks. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/news/social-isolation-loneliness-older-people-pose-health-risks>

⁴ National Institute on Aging. Social Isolation, Loneliness in Older People Pose Health Risks.

What Older Adults can do to Manage Social Isolation

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) released guidance on how to combat social isolation and loneliness in older adults during COVID-19 entitled [How to Fight the Social Isolation of Coronavirus*](#) and [Seven Ways to Cope With Anxiety During the Coronavirus Outbreak*](#).

According to the AARP, Steps to address negative effects of social isolation include:

- Develop a plan to connect with family, friends or loved ones: Talk to family and friends to develop a plan to safely stay in touch during social distancing. This is especially important for people living alone.
- Limit news consumption: Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.
- Care for living things: Caring for pets or plants provides a sense of purpose and improved health.
- Take care of your body: [Physical activity](#) such as walking or light stretching helps calm tension; [eat healthy, well-balanced meals](#), and avoid [alcohol](#) and [drug](#) abuse. It is also important to [get adequate sleep](#).
- Listen to music, find activities that bring joy: Beyond the music and activities available in the common living area shared by residents there are music events and activities online, such as free livestreamed concerts. National Public Radio is maintaining a list of [Live Virtual Concerts*](#).
- Keep your mind active: Completing puzzles (e.g., jigsaw, crossword, sudoku), reading, and engaging in art projects helps to keep the mind occupied and can improve cognitive functioning.
- Use calming techniques: Such as deep breathing, stretching, [meditation](#), prayer, taking a warm bath or shower, or sitting with a pet.
- Find ways to laugh: Watch a TV show, or chat with a friend or family member who brings joy.
- Create short personal videos that can be shared between family and loved ones and the older adult.

What Senior Living Facility Staff or Loved Ones Can Do to Help Residents Manage Social Isolation

It is important for senior living facility staff and loved ones to stay in communication with residents. There are many ways, as described in AARP's article, [7 Ways to Boost Your Loved One's Morale During the Coronavirus Epidemic*](#), that can help older adults stay engaged and connected:

- Send traditional mail in a safe manner: "Handwritten cards and letters are more special than ever..." These handwritten cards can be displayed and serve as a visual reminder that others care. Please remember to wash your hands after [accepting deliveries or collecting mail](#).
- Share a virtual meal: Plan a shared meal together, virtually. Have a meal delivered through many of the meal delivery services available.
- Honor special days: Include older adults in virtual celebrations of birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and holidays. Facility staff can also recognize special days with music or affirming messages.
- Stay in touch: Call your loved one regularly, share stories, and fond memories.
- Create a virtual book club: Read to each other, virtually. Encourage young children to get involved and allow their grandparents to read to them.
- Supply activities: Activities that can keep them busy include jigsaw puzzles, board games, art supplies, large print books or materials for reading, and puzzle books. Ensure to clean properly and [sanitize shared items](#).

- Make a list of organizations for residents: Create a list of community and faith-based organizations that a resident can contact in the event they lack access to information, health care and behavioral health services, and resources such as food distribution centers. Consider including organizations that provide mental health or counseling services.
 - SAMHSA has a hotline, at 800-662-HELP (4357), to help people find counseling services.
 - Also, AARP Foundation's [Connect2Affect program](#)* provides information, self-assessments and affordable options for older people to stay connected. For those without online access, ask a caretaker or family member to assist in finding resources through this program.
 - The [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support to people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters, including COVID-19. Call 1-800-985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.

Additional Resources

- Administration for Community Living's guidance on [What do Older Adults and People with Disabilities Need to Know](#)
- CDC's [Depression is Not a Normal Part of Growing Older](#)
- CDC's [Preparing for COVID-19: Long-term Care Facilities, Nursing Homes](#)
- CDC's [Guidance for Retirement Communities and Independent Living](#)
- AARP article: [Health Care Providers Explore Ways to Tackle Loneliness](#)*

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