

Promoting Psychological Health and Suicide Prevention among Older Adults during COVID-19

Impact of COVID-19 on the Psychological Health of Older Adults

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a number of psychological health challenges, many of which disproportionately affect older adults. These include social, emotional, and behavioral or physical consequences.



SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

[Social isolation and loneliness](#)



EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Fear of contagion; worry and uncertainty related to health problems, economic insecurity, loss of control, and disruptions in routines; and discontent due to fewer opportunities for deriving pleasure and accomplishment



BEHAVIORAL/PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES

Impaired sleep; poor nutrition; increased use of alcohol or drugs; diminished physical activity; and declining health and disability due to reduced access to health and social services, heightened stress and fear, and changes in health behaviors

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Although the true effects of COVID-19 on suicide are not yet known, increases in suicide are expected. There have been anecdotal reports of spikes in suicidal behaviors among older adults during the initial phase of the pandemic, and significant increases in suicide occurred during previous pandemics.^{1, 2}

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Some of the risk factors associated with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic mirror those for suicide in late life:

- ➔ **Social:** Living alone, social isolation, loneliness, lack of belonging, sense of being a burden to others
- ➔ **Emotional:** Depression, hopelessness, prolonged stress and anxiety, triggering of prior trauma/post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance use disorders
- ➔ **Physical:** Declining health and disability, chronic pain, insomnia
- ➔ **Financial/Employment:** Economic uncertainty and insecurity due to reduced income or retirement savings, job loss
- ➔ **Environmental:** Increased access to lethal means (e.g., firearms, medication)

Strategies for Coping with Psychological Health Effects of COVID-19

There are a number of key strategies for promoting successful coping and overall psychological health during the COVID-19 pandemic, which are summarized below. Professionals and others working with older adults are advised to support older adults in trying these strategies in ways *that work best for each individual*.

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1. **Establish structure and routine in daily life.** Consistency and predictability are important for maintaining a sense of control and overall well-being, especially in times of stress, change, or loss.
2. **Seek out regular moments of pleasure, meaning, and mastery.** Engaging in [activities](#) that provide pleasure or meaning, as well as activities that provide a sense of accomplishment, is important for maintaining positive mood and confidence. Match types of activities to current or past interests and abilities.³ As part of this discussion, you may want to ask: “What are some activities that you have enjoyed either recently or in the past? What are some activities that have made you feel proud or like you accomplished something?”
3. **Maintain social connectedness and sense of belonging.** Older adults are particularly vulnerable to the broad effects of [social isolation and loneliness](#) during COVID-19. Some ways in which older adults can maintain connection and a sense of belonging are through regular video visits with family members, peers, or volunteers; virtual social activities, exercise classes, or meetups; and receiving or providing volunteer or mentorship services. Key resources include [AARP Foundation Connect2Affect](#), [Senior Corps](#), and [Friendship Line](#).
4. **Incorporate ways to experience relaxation and calm.** Unmanaged stress can significantly impact emotional and physical health. Learning to manage stress through effective strategies, such as [mindfulness](#), deep breathing, imagery, yoga, or stretching, can increase older adults’ sense of control, confidence, and focus.

5. **Engage the mind.** Keeping the mind active is associated with a number of positive cognitive, emotional, and physical health outcomes. Some activities for engaging the mind include puzzles, crossword puzzles, word/number games, crafts, hobbies, and social activities.
6. **Engage the body.** Regular [physical activity](#) is one of the most important things older adults can do for maintaining heart and brain health, reducing stress, and improving mood. Even just 20 minutes of exercise or movement (including stretching) can make a difference.
7. **Maintain a healthy diet.** Eating a healthy diet consisting of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, plenty of liquids, and limited salt, fat, and sugar provides greater energy and is important for maintaining a healthy body and mind.
8. **Sleep well.** Maintain a regular sleep schedule and consistent sleep location. Limit naps (especially later in the day), caffeine intake, and alcohol consumption, which can interfere with quantity and quality of sleep.
9. **Limit exposure to traditional and social media coverage of COVID-19 and related developments (e.g., daily economic and political developments).** Over-consumption of news related to COVID-19 increases focus on the pandemic and heightens the body's stress response system.
10. **Get [professional help](#) to manage stress or changes in mood, if needed.** Professional help, whether brief coaching on effective coping skills or ongoing therapy and support, can be very helpful for managing challenges associated with COVID-19 (see the "Seeking Professional Support" section below).

Key Tip:

Some older adults can be easily overwhelmed or find it difficult to implement numerous lifestyle changes at once. Therefore, it often works best to start with one or two strategies and build on their initial success. Acknowledging and reinforcing positive change can increase confidence and ongoing use of coping strategies.

What Others Can Do to Support Older Adults during COVID-19

The actions and support of others, including professionals, family members, peers, and volunteers, are essential for engaging and helping older adults prevent and manage the psychological health effects of COVID-19.

Following are specific actions for providing support and encouraging and engaging seniors in successful coping. Several of these actions may be more common or relevant for family members or friends to do. However, health and aging services personnel and other professionals can promote social, psychological, and physical adjustment through both their direct contact with older adults and the education and support of family members and other allies.

1. **Maintain regular contact.** Encourage regular contact through video or phone. Scheduling contact at a consistent time, when possible, can help older adults anticipate and prepare for the call. In addition, letters, ["caring cards,"](#) and video messages are effective ways to show older adults they are valued. In-person

“social distance visits” with an individual using appropriate separation and related precautions (e.g., masks worn by both parties) may be considered when permissible and appropriate.

Acknowledging and reinforcing positive change can increase confidence and ongoing use of coping strategies.

2. **Use active listening to connect and acknowledge the situation (without dwelling on challenges).** Active listening involves paraphrasing the content of what an individual said and acknowledging the underlying emotion in the message. This approach increases connection by showing others that they are being truly heard and understood. It can be helpful to begin this with the phrase “It sounds like...”
3. **Gain understanding of the individual’s daily schedule and how they are managing the situation.** How someone spends their time on a daily basis is often not obvious to others or spontaneously shared. You may inquire about this by saying, “I’d like to hear how you’ve been spending your time. Can you walk me through what you did each day over the past few days?” Follow up by inquiring specifically about the morning, afternoon, and evening, if needed. You may also invite the individual to record how they spend their time in a daily calendar.
4. **Share stories and experiences of one’s own life that may deepen connection.** Sharing experiences related to one’s own life (or encouraging family and friends to share) can help redirect a person’s focus beyond the pandemic and their immediate personal situation and strengthen interpersonal connections.
5. **Maintain a positive attitude and an optimistic outlook, incorporating humor when possible.** Modeling optimism can help instill hope. When possible during interactions, use [humor](#), which has been shown to prevent and relieve stress and stimulate positive changes in the body.
6. **Encourage and support involvement in pleasurable and meaningful activities and self-care.** Encouraging and helping to identify and plan even small activities that provide pleasure or meaning (often referred to as “activity scheduling”) can help older adults engage in and derive satisfaction from positive activities. Using [activity lists](#) and developing an [activity schedule or plan](#) can often be helpful. Follow up on experiences in subsequent contacts to encourage follow-through.
7. **Help solve challenges and simplify lifestyle, as appropriate.** As we age, some tasks require more mental effort, and our sense of control often diminishes (even outside of a pandemic situation). This can lead some older adults to easily feel overwhelmed. Help them simplify decisions and their environment when possible.
8. **Offer to provide or arrange for support for basic needs, such as grocery shopping, transportation to medical appointments, and meal delivery.** AARP Foundation Connect2Affect includes a [Local Assistance Directory](#) for locating support for basic and other needs in one’s community.
9. **Elicit ideas or suggestions to enable the individual to help and support others in their life and express appreciation for the relationship.** Providing opportunities to help another person can increase one’s confidence and sense of belonging and purpose, as well as strengthen the interpersonal connection. This is especially the case in late life when giving back is frequently a major source of personal meaning.

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Because early interventions to improve coping and alleviate symptoms are associated with the best outcomes, it is important to identify signs of unsuccessful coping.

10. **Using a supportive, non-directive approach, encourage and assist the individual in obtaining professional help, if needed** (see the section “Seeking Professional Support” below). Promoting awareness of the availability and effectiveness of professional support can greatly increase the likelihood that older adults will seek help. It is most effective to use a guiding and encouraging stance (as opposed to a more directive approach) that acknowledges the individual’s feelings and provides hope for change.

Identifying Challenges in Coping with COVID-19

Feelings of stress related to COVID-19 are all around us and a normal reaction to a pandemic. Approximately half of adults in the United States have reported that COVID-19 has negatively affected their psychological health.⁴ While heightened stress is an expected reaction, some individuals are experiencing more significant or prolonged distress that can put them at risk for developing (or exacerbating) mental health or substance use conditions. Because early interventions to improve coping and alleviate symptoms are associated with the best outcomes, it is important to identify signs of unsuccessful coping. Symptoms warrant professional attention when they significantly interfere with social, occupational, or personal functioning and/or are a significant change from previous functioning.

Warning signs of emotional distress include:⁵

- » Eating or sleeping too much or too little
- » Pulling away from people and things
- » Having low or no energy
- » Having unexplained aches and pains, such as constant stomachaches or headaches
- » Feeling helpless or hopeless
- » Excessive smoking, drinking, or using drugs, including prescription medications
- » Worrying a lot of the time; feeling guilty but not sure why
- » Thinking of hurting or killing yourself or someone else
- » Having difficulty readjusting to home or work life

Factors associated with being most at risk for emotional and severe emotional stress include:⁶

Emotional Stress

- » Experience of previous disaster
- » Loss of a loved one or friend in a disaster
- » Lack of economic stability and/or English language proficiency
- » Lack of mobility or independence (older adults)

Severe Emotional Stress

- » Exposure to other traumas, including severe accidents, abuse, assault, combat, or rescue work
- » Chronic medical illness or psychological disorders
- » Chronic poverty, homelessness, or discrimination
- » Recent or subsequent major life stressors or emotional strain

 **Key Tip:**

Emotional symptoms may present or worsen months or years after the pandemic.

Older adults are about three times less likely than younger adults with mental health needs to seek help.

Screening Tools for Identifying Social and Emotional Symptoms

A number of scientifically established screening tools are available that can help identify whether someone is having significant difficulty coping and may benefit from professional support. The following free questionnaires may be completed by older adults online.

- ➔ [Mental health and substance use problems](#), including depression, anxiety, PTSD, and alcohol and substance use
- ➔ Behavioral health issues, such as [insomnia](#) and [chronic pain](#)
- ➔ [Social isolation](#) and [loneliness](#)

Structured screening and assessment tools for use by health and other professionals for identifying [suicide risk](#) are also available.

 **Key Tip:**

For older adults who may be at risk for suicide, it is important to reduce access to lethal means, such as through safe firearm storage. [Free online training](#) and related resources for supporting individuals in reducing access to lethal means are available.

Getting help for emotional and related challenges has just become much easier for older adults.

Seeking Professional Support

It is important for seniors, their loved ones, and professionals to be aware that **mental health treatment with older adults is generally very effective** and as effective as with younger adults. Unfortunately, older adults are about three times less likely than younger adults with mental health needs to seek help.⁷ Further, due to social isolation, reduced access to health and mental health care providers, and other factors, the pandemic may delay help-seeking for depression and other mental health issues.

Fortunately, [getting help](#) for emotional and related challenges has just become much easier for older adults due to recent changes in Medicare during COVID-19. During the pandemic, Medicare will cover mental health services provided to older adults in their homes and other locations (e.g., nursing home, hospital) through either video or phone. In addition, several free, confidential resources are available for individuals who may benefit from immediate crisis or emotional support (see “Crisis Support” in the “Resources” section below).

Final Thoughts

Older adults are particularly vulnerable to the psychological health consequences of COVID-19. Addressing psychological health challenges and risk factors early can significantly increase adjustment and prevent decline in both psychological and physical health.

Professionals, family members, peers, and other allies of older adults are essential to identifying and supporting older adults' psychological health needs.

Professionals, family members, peers, and other allies of older adults are essential to identifying and supporting older adults' psychological health needs during the pandemic. Helping older adults and their family members incorporate key strategies for increasing social, psychological, and physical wellness into daily life, as well as engage and connect older adults with formal care or support resources when necessary, can significantly enhance coping ability, overall functioning, and quality of life. Focusing on the psychological well-being of older adults is essential both now and after COVID-19 subsides, since the psychological health effects of the pandemic for some individuals are likely to be long-term or delayed in occurring.

Resources

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Reducing Loneliness and Social Isolation among Older Adults

<http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/reducing-loneliness-social-isolation-among-older-adults>

This resource includes information on the significance and impact of loneliness and social isolation in late life; tools for identification and assessment; and interventions, approaches, and online and community resources for reducing loneliness and social isolation.

AARP Foundation Connect2Affect

<https://connect2affect.org/>

Connect2Affect has many resources for reducing loneliness and social isolation among older adults. Its Local Assistance Directory includes:

- » Virtual and in-person social activities (e.g., recreation, exercise classes, meetups, volunteer matching)
- » Ways to get support (e.g., in-home care, support groups, errand assistance)
- » Wellness opportunities (e.g., volunteer caregiving, health and nutrition education)
- » Resources for health and mental health needs, transportation, basic needs (e.g., financial assistance, housing, food), and caregiver needs

Searches may be tailored by location and personal factors and preferences. The website also includes articles, videos, and webinars related to social isolation and loneliness in older adults as well as an interactive assessment that classifies level of isolation risk and gives a detailed interpretation and recommendations based on the individual's responses.

Friendship Line

<https://www.ioaging.org/services/all-inclusive-health-care/friendship-line>

Operated by the Institute on Aging, the Friendship Line is an accredited crisis line for individuals ages 60 years and older and adults with disabilities, as well as a warm line for non-emergency emotional support and reassurance. The Friendship Line can be accessed 24/7 at 1-800-971-0016.

AARP Friendly Voice

<https://aarpcommunityconnections.org/friendly-voices/>

AARP Friendly Voice is a virtual call center staffed by volunteers who provide friendly conversation for individuals who are isolated or lonely. Volunteers can be contacted by calling 1-888-281-0145, or a call can be arranged in advance by completing a contact form at the link above.

Increased Access to Mental Health Care for Older Adults: Getting Support during COVID-19

<http://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/increased-access-mental-health-care-older-adults-getting-support-during-covid-19>

This resource includes information on mental health care for older adults, recent changes that have made mental health care easier to obtain during COVID-19, and tools and tips for finding and selecting a provider who is a good fit.

Crisis Support

Disaster Distress Helpline

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/contact-us>

The Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7 crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster, including COVID-19. The Helpline may be accessed by phone at 1-800-985-5990 or by texting TalkWithUs to 66746.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

The Lifeline provides 24/7 emotional support for people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. It may be accessed by phone at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or through online chat at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>.

Crisis Text Line

<https://www.crisistextline.org/>

The Crisis Text Line provides 24/7 crisis counseling and emotional support through text messaging. It can be accessed by texting HOME to 741741.

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Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Web: <http://www.sprc.org>



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