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Olson Brown Bag Lecture

Enhancing Older Adults' Holiday Experience During a Pandemic


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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

- I have no financial relationships to disclose



Learning Objectives

- After this lecture, attendees will be able to:**
 - Identify the effects of social isolation and loneliness on older adults' physical, mental, and cognitive health
 - Describe interventions for combating isolation and loneliness among older adults during the pandemic
 - Discuss special considerations to promote joy and social connectedness during the holidays across generations



Social Isolation and Loneliness

- **Isolation:** An objective lack of social contact
- **Loneliness:** A subjective feeling of being lonely and isolated
- ~¼ of non-institutionalized adults aged 65+ in the US are considered to be socially isolated (National Health and Aging Trends Study; Cudjoe et al., 2020)
- 19% of adults aged 62–91 reported frequent loneliness, 29% reported occasional loneliness (National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project; Hawkey & Koehriginsky, 2018)

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020)



Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older Adults

- **Precipitating/ Risk Factors:**
 - Chronic health conditions
 - Mobility problems
 - Hearing loss and other sensory impairments
 - Living alone
 - Loss/death of life partners and peers
 - Changes in societal roles
 - Transportation issues

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020)



Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older Adults

- **Sub-groups that are more likely to experience isolation and loneliness:**
 - Older women
 - Older people within the LGBTQ community
 - Older people from immigrant communities
 - Older people with depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions
 - Older people with dementia
 - Dementia caregivers

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020)



Social Isolation and Loneliness during COVID19

- Fewer socialization opportunities
 - Senior centers, gyms, places of worship, restaurants are closed
- Fewer community-based services
 - Adult day centers, respite care, meals on wheels, home health services, transportation services
- Delayed in-person healthcare visits
- Lock-down at nursing homes
- Public fear of getting older people sick



Health Effects of Social Isolation and Loneliness on Older Adults

- An estimated \$6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually (Flowers et al., 2017)
- A ~40-50% increased risk of developing dementia (e.g., Kuiper et al., 2015; Penninkilampi et al., 2018; Sutin et al., 2020)
- Along with depression and poor health, loneliness is significantly associated with death wishes in a study of ~35,000 adults aged 65+ (Cheung et al., 2017)
- An increase in depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, dementia-related behavioral problems, failure to thrive in nursing homes (e.g., Lanzito, 2020; Paulin, 2020)



Older Adults and Resilience during the Pandemic

- Older adults are less likely to report negative emotions like anxiety, and more likely to report positive emotions like feelings of calm, interest, and appreciation (Carstensen et al., 2020)
- Their loneliness increased slightly in March but leveled off in April (Luchetti et al., 2020)
- Social distancing to protect older adults from contracting COVID19 may increase negative stereotyping of older adults of being weak, dependent, and helpless (Monahan et al., 2020)



Addressing Isolation and Loneliness during COVID19

Reach Out Proactively

- Social connection and loneliness assessment, intervention, & outreach programs (e.g., insurance company programs, MPTF's CallHub)
- Deploy staff and volunteers of local libraries, senior centers, churches, hospital clinics to make wellness calls
- Set a regular time to talk to older family members and friends on the phone or via video-chat
- Knock on an older neighbor's door for physically-distanced brief visits



Addressing Isolation and Loneliness during COVID19

Make Technology Accessible to Older Adults

- Help set up wi-fi, microphone/speaker, video-camera
- Purchase a tablet that is:
 - Loaded with books, music, games
 - Set up for easy access to movies/TV
 - Ready for Zoom and email (e.g., GrandPad)
- Show them how to use FaceTime, Zoom, and other communication apps



Addressing Isolation and Loneliness during COVID19

Encourage Virtual Social/ Leisure Activities

- Book clubs
- Coffee and happy hour
- Religious services and events
- Classes (e.g., GetSetUp)
- Exercise programs
- Virtual tours of museum, gallery, or the zoo
- Online games
- Support groups (e.g., Mlinac & Weiskittle, 2020)



Addressing Isolation and Loneliness during COVID19

Encourage Regular Physical Exercise, as well as Cognitive/Social Engagement

- Send books, magazines, jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles
- Send arts and crafts material (e.g., HeART kits)
- Take a walk while talking on the phone or video-chatting
- Take a physically-distanced walk
- Encourage volunteering opportunities (Note: virtual or in-person)



Addressing Isolation and Loneliness during COVID19

Intergenerational Initiatives

- Dancing Heart Live!
- Gen2Gen
- Generations United
- Invisible Hands
- Lifting Hearts with Hearts
- Louisville COVID Match Online
- Meals Together
- Sages and Seekers



Guidelines on Holiday Celebrations during COVID19

1. Who are you putting at risk?
2. What precautions are you taking before you meet?
3. How are you limiting the risk at and after the gathering? (Rupp, 2020)

The collage includes a CDC banner for COVID-19, a University of Louisville article titled 'How to handle the holidays during COVID-19', a 'BEST' award graphic, and an illustration of a Thanksgiving celebration.



Supporting Older Adults Living at Home during the Holiday Season

Set Holiday Expectations

- What's the meaning of this holiday for
 - the older person?
 - the family?
 - You?
- What is the purpose of getting together?
- Acknowledge positive and negative emotions, including grief and sadness (Ishikawa, 2020)
- How will you cultivate a sense of togetherness without being physically together?



Supporting Older Adults Living at Home during the Holiday Season

Holiday Preparation

- Seek suggestions and ideas from an older family and friend
- Share pictures or videos of the progress of decoration
- Ask them to teach you a new recipe while talking on the phone or video-chatting
- Wrap presents together via Zoom or FaceTime
- Ask younger family members to help with outdoor decorations, indoor cleaning, or groceries drop-off
- Offer to help an older person order or buy gifts online
- Send virtual gifts (e.g., class subscription)



Supporting Older Adults Living at Home during the Holiday Season

Adapt Family Traditions and Rituals

- Schedule to talk and eat together during a celebration
- Schedule a virtual story time, read a passage from a book, a collection of poems, or a religious text
- Say prayers or do a devotional together virtually
- Attend an online religious service together
- Take a socially distanced walk to look at holiday lights and decorations (weather permitting)
- Watch a football game or a game show together via FaceTime or the phone
- Share photos and videos of children unwrapping gifts



Supporting Families of Older Adults during the Holiday Season

- Pay attention to how you are feeling
- Take some deep breaths
- Prioritize and delegate
- Make time for yourself
- Practice self compassion



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Questions / Discussion

