



Loneliness and Social Isolation: Guarding the Mental Health of Older Adults

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Loneliness: The feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact.

Social isolation: Lack of social connections; can lead to loneliness in some people.
(CDC, 2020)

Why are loneliness and social isolation problems for older adults?

- Social isolation increases a person's risk of premature death as much as, if not more than, smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.
- Social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of developing dementia.
- Loneliness is linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Physical illness and chronic conditions such as heart failure are worsened and more likely to be fatal among patients who experience loneliness.

Who is most at risk among older adults?

- Those in racial or ethnic minority groups or who are immigrants
- Those who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender
- Those who have been (or are currently) victims of elder abuse

What can you do to reduce the impact of loneliness and social isolation?

- Seek out ways to interact with others (safely).
- Find online groups with shared interests such as crafting, travel, or the outdoors.
- Learn to use technology that allows for video calls or chats with family and friends.
- Call friends and family regularly or ask them to call you.
- Volunteer with a local organization.

How has COVID impacted social interaction and increased loneliness?

- In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, individual health concerns, lockdowns, canceled events, statewide guidance for social gatherings, and limitations on visitation to medical and long-term care facilities have limited social activity for everyone, but older adults are especially hard-hit.
- Because older adults are at higher risk for a life-threatening COVID-19 infection, many regulations and recommendations have targeted this group specifically.

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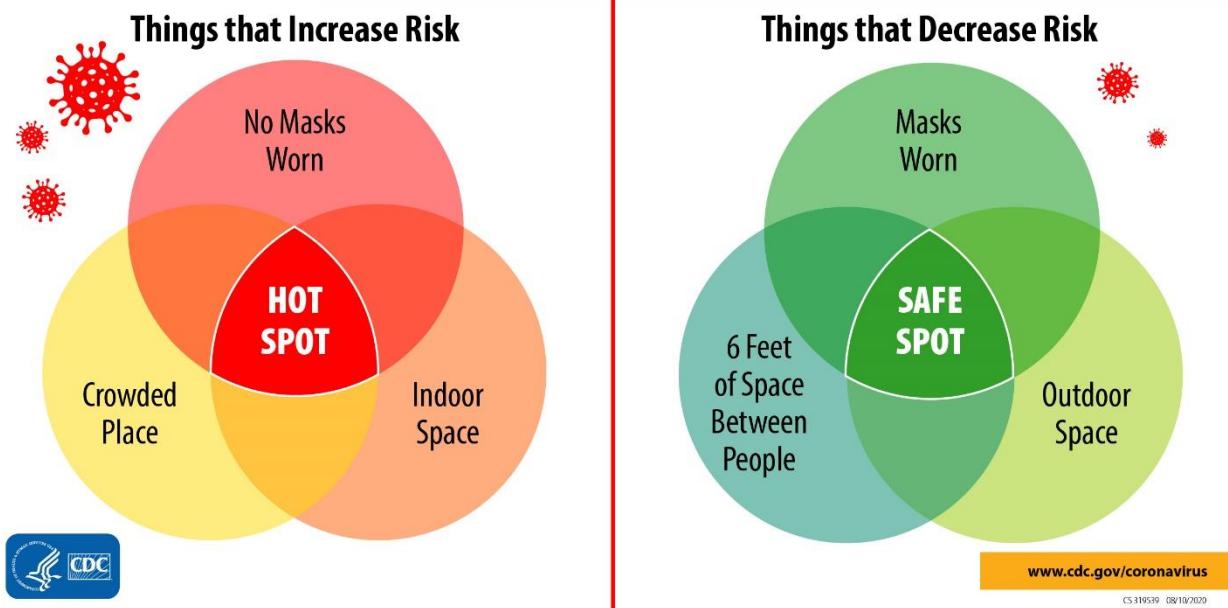
- Older adults were already at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness, so increased isolation related to reduction in pandemic spread may have greater impact on this group.

Can I interact safely during the pandemic?

- There are many factors to take into account when deciding to go out or to be around others during a pandemic. It is advised that you take risk factors into account:

- What is the rate of COVID-19 in my community?
- What daily precautions do I take to reduce my risk of contracting COVID-19?
- Will I come into close contact with anyone during my outing/meeting? What precautions will they take to protect themselves and protect me?
- How long will I be meeting? Can I keep my distance from others?
- How many people will be there?
- Do I have any conditions that significantly increase my risk of infection?
- Do I live with anyone who has conditions that increase risk of infection?

Tips for Reducing Risk of Getting COVID-19



Ideas for Safer Social Interaction:

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- * **Driveway visit with family or friends:** Wearing masks, sitting 6 feet apart, outdoors
- * **Join your “bubble” with someone else who is alone:** If you and a neighbor or friend are both isolated and not interacting with anyone else, you should be able to safely meet together with minimal precautions. *If either one of you is meeting with others, this increases risk, and all precautions should be taken.*
- * **Zoom, Skype, or FaceTime with family members and friends:** This can be done for the most mundane reasons or for a special occasion.

What can you do if you are concerned about your mental health?

- Call your doctor and discuss your concerns. If they seem dismissive, consider a second opinion or seek the advocacy of a family member or friend.
- Look for an online support group or therapist. Many therapists will meet with patients via telehealth appointments.
- Talk to a friend or family member about your concerns.
- If you do not have anyone to talk to, especially if you are having thoughts of self-harm or suicide, call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1(800) 273-8255** or the **Arkansas Crisis Center at (888)274-7472**.

What can you do if you are concerned about someone else?

- Reach out to them via phone, text, or safe visit.
- Ask them specifically how they are feeling and if they are feeling lonely. Sometimes people are lonely even if they are not alone. Caregivers can be especially prone to loneliness.
- Set up a schedule of check-in times or days with them.
- Suggest that they call a doctor or helpline (numbers listed above) or help them call.



Depression Screening Tool

Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

| | Not at all | Several days | More than half the days | Nearly every day |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. Feeling tired or having little energy | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 5. Poor appetite or overeating | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. Feeling bad about yourself—or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 7. Trouble concentrating on things such as reading the newspaper or watching television | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

If you clicked on any problems above, how difficult have they made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not difficult at all Somewhat difficult Very difficult Extremely difficult

Reference

Based on *Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)* Developed by Drs. Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B.W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke, and

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colleagues, with an educational grant from Pfizer Inc.
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Online version: <https://screening.mhanational.org/screening-tools/depression>

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References and Other Available Resources

Keys to Embracing Aging Program:

<https://www.uaex.edu/life-skills-wellness/aging/success.aspx>

Mental Health America: <https://www.mhanational.org/>

- Depression in Older Adults: <https://www.mhanational.org/depression-older-adults>

- Preventing Suicide in Older Adults: <https://www.mhanational.org/preventing-suicide-older-adults>

- Anxiety in Older Adults: <https://www.mhanational.org/anxiety-older-adults>

CDC.gov, “Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions”:

<https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html#:~:text=Older%20adults%20are%20at%20increased,chronic%20illness%2C%20and%20hearing%20loss.>

CDC.gov, COVID-19 resources: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

CDC.gov, “Deciding to Go Out.” <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/deciding-to-go-out.html>