

Reaching out to isolated older adults is essential during coronavirus: 7 things you can do

March 26 2020, by Basia Belza, Anita Souza and Tatiana Sadak



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Older adults always need social connection, but they need it now more than ever. The novel coronavirus brings with it [unprecedented fear and](#)

[uncertainty](#). Vulnerable seniors need help. With face-to-face encounters discouraged, our society must develop creative strategies to help them connect.

[As professors](#) at [the University of Washington](#), which is near the epicenter of the [coronavirus](#) outbreak, [we study aging](#) and the health concerns of older adults. There are a number of reasons they are more vulnerable: Those over 65 typically have more chronic conditions than younger people. An aging [immune system](#) makes it harder to fight off diseases, infections and viruses. Recoveries are usually slower and more complicated. Older adults—perhaps living alone, on a fixed income, no longer driving, unfamiliar with using public transportation, and with undiagnosed or poorly managed depression—might already be socially isolated. For millions of them, the risk of COVID-19 may amplify already-existing problems.

With that in mind, here are some ways to [safely connect](#) during this crisis with older family members, friends and neighbors.

1. Help with social support

Check in with older adult neighbors. Send a text or email, phone them, or leave a note on their front door—whatever they prefer. Just let them know you're thinking about them, and ask if they need anything. If you're cooking, make a little extra and offer a dish to them; put it in a disposable container, use a disinfectant wipe to sanitize the outside of the container, and leave a thoughtful note.

2. Help with food and essentials

Lots of nonperishable items have disappeared from stores, especially hand sanitizers and toilet paper. Seniors risking a trip to the store might

find mostly empty shelves anyway. Consider shopping for them while doing yours, or help them set up a revolving delivery from the grocery store.

3. Help with medications

Again, you could make the trip to the pharmacy yourself, or set up ongoing delivery. The latter might require a three-way call to the drug store, and maybe a follow-up call to their health insurance. Some of the elderly have trouble remembering to take medications; you can ask the pharmacy to prepackage medications in blister packs with designations for morning and evening. You can also call to remind them to take their medications.

4. Help with health care appointments

Most clinics now offer phone or video conference appointments. In the time of COVID-19, it's a safe way to visit. Particularly if you are a family member, or have power of attorney for medical decision-making, you could participate in these appointments. Should the older person urgently need an in-person evaluation, phone ahead for them, report symptoms and ask for instructions as to next steps.

5. Engage the grandchildren

With school closed for the time being, your children could help an older adult learn something new about today's technology, whether it be a laptop or a TV remote. Or they might send emails to grandparents or elderly neighbors to chat about what they're doing, or ask them to participate online in virtual classrooms, symphonies or museums. Best of all: Your children could use this time to record some family history.

6. Connect with trusted organizations

Remote-volunteer for local organizations serving older adults. Many of these agencies, stretched thin, may prefer financial support. Many provide meals for seniors, and most of those are providing home delivery during the COVID-19 crisis. Consider helping out by purchasing prepaid gas cards to support the drivers.

7. For dementia care partners

If you know someone caring for an [older person with dementia](#), reach out to them. Many of them occasionally use adult day care, but during this outbreak, these facilities are unavailable. Any support groups they normally attend might not be in session either. The lack of services may increase their stress. So help them set up phone or video conferencing with other dementia care partners to strategize on ways to cope.

Also, music is a powerful way to elicit positive emotions from the elderly. Help grandchildren or neighbors make playlists that resonate with them.

These ideas are only a starting point. [With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations](#) in hand, engage in a dialog with your family, friends and neighbors to generate your own action plan. Through communication and collaboration, we can reduce the social isolation of our [older adults](#) by reaching out.

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