

# Talking key to supporting older people during COVID-19 crisis

April 8 2020, by Michael Addelman

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A University of Manchester psychologist is urging an anxious public to

learn from how older people cope with the COVID-19 crisis.

Dr. Louisa Jackman says as long as it's from a [safe distance](#), remotely or with members of the household, [conversation](#), especially with older people, is a practical way to help everyone's mental health.

She also sets out some tips on how the best way to use conversation to help our mental health during the crisis.

She said: "Talking is always good; wherever and whenever you can. At a time when we're all feeling helpless, it's good share something about our troubles or fears and give people, especially older people, the opportunity to help, comfort or advise us. That's a win win for everyone.

"Older people often have a different attitude towards sharing anxiety or fear or what counts as being 'traumatic.'" That means they're more likely to express a stiff upper lip, and we're` all in it together attitude.

"That can be helpful for younger family members to hear but we mustn't forget that it can also disguise loneliness and fear of 'being a burden.'"

She added: "Older people tend to have a wider view of the world. Because their lifetime experience is so extensive, they can accept that things can get better- and worse, but understand that it will change, given time.

"So as neighborliness has risen to unprecedented levels, I urge the public to take advantage of it by starting a conversation with older neighbors and acquaintances. And once you've started, don't stop when lock-down is over! Despite everything, it's a good opportunity for all generations to reconnect.

"This period of time will end and we will all have stories about it—make

yours the one where you finally met the older gentleman next door."

Dr. Jackman's tips for opening up conversations:

- Don't just ask older people how they are, but talk about their lives, and how they have coped through difficult times. Ask for advice or comfort when you need it.
- Even if someone says they're fine, don't stop that contact, ask them another time, or just ring up and tell them how your day has been, so they don't have to tell you whether they're okay or not.
- Begin conversations by asking "what have you been up to?" or "have you heard from anyone today? Rather than "how are you?" That avoids the prospect of someone not 'wanting to be a bother'
- Conversation openers that might give you clues as to how people are feeling such offering to help in specific ways like "can I get you anything for tea?" are helpful.
- Don't feel afraid to talk about COVID—but ask 'permission' first: "It's pretty grim—are you following the news or having a break from it?"—give people the opportunity to choose what level of information they want.
- We're in early days of lockdown so we may have many weeks ahead. So plan with your friends, [family members](#), neighbors who may be old something regular each week to stay in touch and prioritise it.
- Help people develop routines, this may be extra important for someone whose days are dictated by outside help.
- Don't be afraid to have serious conversations about people's end-of-life wishes. Making preferences known is an important way of exerting control over the unknown and enables people to do something tangible for their families.

Provided by University of Manchester

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