

COVID-19 loneliness linked to elevated psychiatric symptoms in older adults

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Although social distancing is crucial in thwarting the spread of COVID-19, isolation and the ensuing loneliness may be severely detrimental for older adults. A new study conducted by researchers at

Bar-Ilan University and the University of Haifa has linked COVID-19-based loneliness in older adults with elevated psychiatric symptoms of anxiety, depression, and trauma symptoms that immediately follow exposure to trauma. The findings were recently published in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*.

The study focused on [older adults](#), a sector of the population at greater risk for COVID-19 health complications that likely remained in stricter self-isolation than other [age groups](#) due to this risk. Notably, the researchers found that the effect of loneliness on psychiatric symptoms was most pronounced among participants who felt subjectively older than their [chronological age](#). On the other hand, participants who felt subjectively younger than their chronological age exhibited no psychiatric symptoms related to loneliness.

"The way older adults perceive old age and their own aging may be more important to their coping and wellbeing than their chronological age," said Prof. Amit Shrira, from the Gerontology Program at the Interdisciplinary Department of Social Sciences at Bar-Ilan University, who conducted the study with Prof. Ehud Bodner and Dr. Yaakov Hoffman, of Bar-Ilan, and Prof. Yuval Palgi from the University of Haifa.

The findings may assist in identifying older adults at high risk for developing psychiatric symptoms due to COVID-19-related loneliness. In addition, they can guide the development of suitable interventions aimed at lowering perception of age in order to mitigate the negative impact of such loneliness and create a protective factor to prevent such a link. The data should also be helpful in advancing preparatory measures for a future pandemic.

What can be done to relieve the emotional burden of isolation among the elderly? Shrira, a [clinical psychologist](#) by training, recommends

providing ongoing assistance and communication while adhering to relevant health guidelines. Regular conversations with family members, volunteers and even strangers can prevent the onset of deeper [loneliness](#) and the sense that no one is willing to hear their pain. Allowing them to share their experience and wisdom helps them feel more valuable. For those coping with feelings of boredom and emptiness during isolation, Shrira suggests that reading, listening to music, solving puzzles, cooking and baking, [physical exercise](#) (even the most minimal) and other leisure activities can refresh the normal, monotonous routine.

More information: Amit Shrira et al, COVID-19 Related Loneliness and Psychiatric Symptoms among Older Adults: The Buffering Role of Subjective Age, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jagp.2020.05.018](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2020.05.018)

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