

Study indicates link between tech use, anxiety, depression in older adults

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Using data collected from the [National Health and Aging Trends Study](#), Harvard Medical School researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital explored the various communication patterns that adults age 65 and older

reported having with friends, family, and health care providers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

They examined the relationship between different communication modes and reported feelings of anxiety and depression about the pandemic as well as incidence of loneliness. Data were derived from the responses of more than 3,100 study participants to a supplemental survey administered as part of the study between June and October 2020.

Researchers found that in-person interactions with friends, family, and [health care providers](#) were associated with fewer [mental health](#) concerns. In contrast, interactions using digital technologies, including emails and video calls, were associated with feelings of depression and anxiety about COVID-19.

Rebecca Robbins, assistant professor of medicine at HMS and associate scientist in the Division of Sleep and Circadian Disorders at Brigham and Women's, is first author of the study published in the *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, which explored the intersectionality of technology use and mental health in [older adults](#).

"While it is possible that those who were nervous about the pandemic and experiencing feelings of depression and anxiety were more likely to use [digital tools](#) , as opposed to in-person interactions, it is also plausible that the digital technologies used were not suited to the needs of older adults, which could have engendered the mental health concerns we observed in our study among users of digital platforms," Robbins said.

While was argued that technology could be a tool for alleviating the isolation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing policies, Robbins said, further research is needed to design communication technologies that meet the needs of older adults as a means of preparing for future pandemics.

"Older adults faced an elevated risk of poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, necessary public health measures to reduce risk of COVID-19 may have exacerbated the risk for loneliness and mental health concerns among these individuals," said Robbins.

"Given our study's findings of increased feelings of anxiety and depression among older adults using [digital technologies](#), we need to consider ways of designing technologies to meet the needs of older adults," she added.

More information: Rebecca Robbins et al, Digital Communications Technology Use and Feelings of Anxiety, Depression, and Loneliness Among Older Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Applied Gerontology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/07334648231169086](https://doi.org/10.1177/07334648231169086)

Provided by Harvard University

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