



REDUCING THE EFFECTS OF LONELINESS AND ISOLATION ON OLDER ADULTS DURING COVID-19

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These materials were prepared as part of the Rapid Response Network, a joint initiative between the **California Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission** (MHSOAC) and **Social Finance, Inc.** to support jurisdictions in fast-paced research and decision making driven by COVID-19.

The network aims to **facilitate connections** among jurisdictions facing similar challenges, and to supplement that shared experience with **support from external experts**—in order to deliver fast, customized, digestible research and analysis that strengthens local capacity.

We recognize that the pace of these responses means that they are likely to be both incomplete and imperfect. If you have suggestions for improvement or questions about these materials, we would love to hear from you. Please email Jake Segal (jsegal@socialfinance.org) or Sean Burpoe (sburpoe@socialfinance.org).

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▶ CONTEXT

Loneliness and isolation have negative impacts on mental and physical health, and social distancing can exacerbate the problem, particularly in older adults

- **Social isolation, loneliness, and living alone can lead to heightened mental and physical health problems**, resulting in an average increase in likelihood of mortality of 29%, 26%, and 32%, respectively, according to a meta-analytic review of 70 studies (nearly all of which examined social isolation, loneliness, or living alone separately).²⁰ Specifically, social isolation and loneliness are associated with an array of negative health outcomes, including increased rates of:
 - Heart disease and strokes²³
 - Dementia^{19, 24}
 - Anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation^{2, 25}
- **Loneliness and isolation are compounded by several factors for older adults**, including loss of peers, shifting societal roles, physical health problems, and financial insecurity, among others.¹⁵ Older adults are also being encouraged to shelter in place as some states begin to reopen, **lengthening their periods of isolation**.²²
- **Several factors may lead to increased prevalence of poor mental health among older adults during COVID-19**, including:^{11, 17}
 - Preexisting high levels of living alone
 - High levels of poor mental health, including self-reports of feeling depressed, worried, nervous, or anxious alongside the prevalence of suicidal ideation – the highest suicide rate in the U.S. is in older, white males
 - Increased likelihood of serious COVID-19 symptoms in older adults and the increase in depression associated with those requiring home health care or hospitalization
- **Long-term health may be threatened even after social distancing subsides** due to lack of exercise, a changed diet, reduced cognitive stimulation, and other factors.¹²
- **Deaths of despair – those caused by drugs, alcohol, and suicide – are predicted to rise in the US by between 27,644 to 154,037 across age groups over the next decade due to COVID-19**, depending on the pace of recovery and impact of unemployment.¹⁸

▶ ENCOURAGE OLDER ADULTS TO STAY CONNECTED AND ACTIVE

Even in the face of isolation and limited opportunities for socialization, literature advises maintaining activities, peer supports, and connectivity

Perform proactive outreach	Maintain activities, exercise, and sleep	Utilize peer support	Stay connected
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Redeploy senior center staff and volunteers to combat social isolation by performing outreach to all seniors in a catchment area³⁰• Jurisdictions have set up senior outreach lines staffed by county employees (such as within the library system) to reach-out and check-in on older adults³¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Best practice guidance encourages reading, writing, and humor,⁵ alongside ensuring older adults are exercising and getting the right amount of sleep^{2, 12}• Games like jigsaw puzzles, sudoku, and crossword puzzles help with cognitive stimulation^{12, 14}• In the absence of going somewhere in person, use the internet to “travel” (e.g., via Google Earth) or virtually visit museums¹⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some states and organizations use peer support networks, which pair an older adult specialist with a peer to work on wellness issues¹⁵• Peer Partners groups can be found through Mental Health America affiliates and the MHA’s Resource Center¹⁵• Potentially through peers, the CDC advises notifying older adults that distress is common during crises and that help exists¹⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Older adults who take part in social groups have a lower risk of death.²⁷ Many such groups – including numerous book clubs, exercise classes – have moved online• Encourage communication through Facebook, Facetime, email, and other sources as possible;¹⁴ some have organized online matching programs to pair older adults with neighbors for key needs like groceries• Family and loved ones can ask how they can help, advise “news diets,”⁶ and increase the frequency of telephone contact³

▶ USE DATA TO TARGET NEED FOR COMMUNICATION & INTERVENTION

Data can be used to target individuals at risk for loneliness / social isolation and tailor communications and intervention

Leverage data

- Healthcare entities can use data to **target marginalized and disadvantaged communities** with mental health interventions first³
- **Utilize predictive analytics** to identify groups at high risk for loneliness and social isolation⁹
- For example, Humana has developed a loneliness predictive model to **identify at-risk members and target them with interventions**. The model incorporated demographic, claims and an independent loneliness assessment²⁹
 - Interventions have included **connecting college students to seniors** for companionship, house help, technology, etc., and encouraging the use of Silver Sneakers – a physical activity app for aging individuals – and the company built on the efforts with a [loneliness and isolation awareness campaign](#) related to COVID-19²⁹
- Similarly, Cigna launched a [social connectivity pilot program](#) for its Medicare Advantage members that uses predictive analytics to identify those most at risk for COVID-19

Develop a communications strategy

- Healthcare organizations should **engage with elderly patients through their preferred channels** and with multiple touchpoints, and ideally with forward-looking information to help older adults envision the future⁹
- Research has found that about **85% of seniors age 65 and above own a cell phone** (with about half owning a smart phone). As such, text messages can reach most of this population. It can also be helpful to include a caregiver, when appropriate, in communications²⁸
- Data shows that **Medicaid members respond best to text messages and phone calls**; a feedback loop on modalities and contact times can improve future engagement⁹
- Before COVID-19, health insurance companies like Humana, Cigna, CareMore, Blue Cross Blue Shield, and Commonwealth Care Alliance had begun to [communicate with at-risk members](#) with surveys, regular calls, and tips and tricks around loneliness

▶ INVEST IN ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Despite obstacles to adoption and use of technology, its use is particularly critical in an environment of social distancing

Build access to general tech tools



- While the “digital divide” between older adults and their counterparts has lessened in recent years, **barriers to technology** adoption and use, ranging from lack of comfort and familiarity with technology to physical challenges with its use, still remain²⁶
- Ensuring older adults have the opportunity to engage with technology with **time, patience, and practice** can be beneficial for learning outcomes, as can **well-written instructions or steps** for an array of online skills²¹
- **Caregivers and health professionals can help with implementation** of technology while also using it to monitor the needs and wellbeing of older adults^{4, 13}
- **Creative uses of technology include streaming relevant events** for a given organization’s population (e.g., [religious services](#), [exercise classes](#), [lectures](#), and other events that help older adults feel connected to their communities)¹⁰

Use telehealth services



- Telephone and video visits for medical purposes can be **improved by certain common-sense interventions**, including:¹²
 - Ensure vulnerable patients are **wearing their hearing aides**
 - Enlisting the **help of a family member to assist with tech**
 - Enlist a **caregiver/family member in three-way call**
- Clinicians should **inquire about unmet social and functional needs**¹²
- Consider that certain **procedures which are elective for younger adults may not be elective for older adults**¹²
- **Cognitive behavioral therapies can be delivered online** to both decrease loneliness and improve mental wellbeing,³ and some [support groups have migrated online](#), as well

▶ MOST USEFUL RESOURCES

If you only have a few minutes or are looking for something specific

- **An excellent analysis of research and a poll on the implications of COVID-19 on mental health, including a section on older adults.** Nirmita Panchal et al., “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Abuse,” Kaiser Family Foundation, 21 April 2020.
- **An accessible summary of the challenge facing older adults’ mental health alongside potential interventions.** Patrick Hendry, “Older Adults & Isolation During COVID-19,” Mental Health America, 2020.
- **A compilation of resources related to loneliness and COVID-19.** Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness, “How to stay connected while intentionally isolated,” accessed 13 May 2020.

REFERENCES

1	<i>Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness</i>	How to stay connected while intentionally isolated.
2	<i>Coalition to End Social Isolation & Loneliness</i>	Social Isolation & Loneliness During COVID-19
3	<i>Lancet Public Health</i>	COVID-19 and the consequences of isolating the elderly
4	<i>Johns Hopkins Medicine</i>	Coronavirus and COVID-19: Caregiving for the Elderly
5	<i>Medscape</i>	COVID-19: Mitigating Loneliness, Anxiety in Seniors
6	AARP	Stress, Social Isolation From the Coronavirus May Raise Suicide Risk
7	<i>World Health Organization</i>	Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak
8	<i>ResearchGate</i>	Covid-19: An Exposition, with a Focus on Social Isolation in the Elderly (UK) (Draft)
9	AHIMA	COVID-19 and Social Isolation Puts Elderly at Risk for Loneliness
10	<i>American Journal of Managed Care</i>	Preventing Loneliness Among the Senior Population During the COVID-19 Crisis
11	<i>Kaiser Family Foundation</i>	The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use
12	<i>JAMA Network</i>	Meeting the Care Needs of Older Adults Isolated at Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic
13	<i>Psychology Today</i>	How to Help Older Adults Fight Loneliness During COVID-19
14	<i>Home Care Assistance</i>	Stimulating Activities to Keep Seniors Engaged During the COVID-19 Pandemic
15	<i>MHA National</i>	Older Adults & Isolation During COVID-19
16	<i>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</i>	Stress and Coping
17	<i>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</i>	Older Adults
18	<i>Well Being Trust</i>	Projected Deaths of Despair from COVID-19
19	<i>Evidence-Based Nursing</i>	Older adults reporting social isolation or loneliness show poorer cognitive function 4 years later
20	<i>Perspectives on Psychological Science</i>	Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review
21	<i>Stanford Center on Longevity</i>	Older Adults and Technology: Moving Beyond the Stereotypes
22	AARP	Older Adults Are Encouraged to 'Shelter in Place' as States Start to Reopen
23	<i>ScienceDaily</i>	Loneliness is bad for the heart
24	<i>JAMA Network</i>	Loneliness and Risk of Alzheimer Disease
25	<i>Journal of Affective Disorder</i>	Suicidal thoughts and behaviors and social isolation: A narrative review of the literature.
26	<i>Pew Research Center</i>	Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults
27	<i>American Psychological Association</i>	The risks of social isolation
28	<i>Weave</i>	Best Practices for Sending Reminder Messages to Elderly Patients
29	<i>Humana</i>	Loneliness and Social Isolation Issue Brief
30	<i>Center for an Urban Future</i>	Supporting older adults through coronavirus
31	<i>NBC12</i>	Henrico launches Senior Outreach Call Center during COVID-19 pandemic