

Loneliness and isolation vs resilience and wisdom:

How are older adults faring in the pandemic and what can we learn from them?

Steve Wengel, MD
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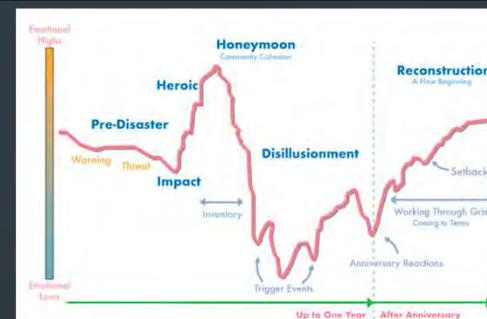


Agenda

1. Review surveys of older adults' mental health during the pandemic
2. Discuss ageism as it applies to the pandemic
3. Review ways to reduce social isolation and its effects on the wellbeing of older adults
4. List helpful resources for enhancing psychological wellbeing

UNMC Geriatric Psychiatry Clinic

- Vicki Adolf, RN
- Andrew Baumgartner, MD
- Lori Davitt, RN
- Amy Dorton, MSW
- Cali Letchworth Bahati, LPN
- Cecilia Poon, PhD
- Erin Ranum, MD
- Thomas Magnuson, MD
- Steve Wengel, MD



Adapted from Zunin & Myers as cited in DeWolfe, D. J., 2000. Training manual for mental health and human service workers in major disasters (2nd ed., HHS Publication No. ADM 90-538).

Some common reactions to stress

Vague sense of unease

Irritability, impatience

Insomnia

Physical symptoms

Let's all take a deep breath (or 4)

1. Breathe in to a count of 6
2. Hold it for 2 seconds
3. Breathe out to a count of 6
4. Repeat 3 more times

Forbes, October 8, 2020

EDITORS' PICK | Oct 8, 2020, 11:15am EDT | 8,304 views

An Inside Look At How Covid-19 Is Driving An Epidemic Of Loneliness In Nursing Homes



Howard Gleckman Senior Contributor
 Personal Finance
 Cover tax, budget and retirement policy from Washington



Omaha World-Herald News Obituaries Opinion Huskers Entertainment Lifestyles COVID-19 Buy & Sell

JUST IN Biden rolling out plan for \$4 billion global vaccine effort to help poor nations. Get today's latest.

ALERT

Plummeting COVID cases in nursing homes bode well for vaccines, ending pandemic

Henry Gordes Feb 14, 2021 Updated Feb 15, 2021

Lincoln Journal-Star February 7, 2021



**'It feels like freedom' – Lincoln seniors
excited, hopeful after getting first dose of
COVID-19 vaccine**

"I haven't seen my complete family since March 1, which was my birthday, so I'm really excited," said one Lincoln woman.

Typical advice for managing depression in older adults

- Stay active:
 - Physically
 - Cognitively
 - Socially
- Find meaning and purpose
 - Faith traditions
 - Volunteering
- BUT – during a pandemic, it's not so easy!

"Loneliness is a sickness."

Clinic patient
December 2020

Social connections

- Relationship satisfaction and social wellbeing increase in life
- Social isolation and loneliness are associated with
 - Lower quality of life
 - Unhealthy behaviors (smoking, unhealthy diet, lack of exercise)
 - Adverse health outcomes (CV disease, hypertension, pain, depression, suicide)

Social isolation/loneliness and mortality

Premature mortality associated with low social connectedness is comparable to that associated with

- Unhealthy diet
- Physical inactivity
- Alcohol misuse
- Smoking

Mental health consequences of the pandemic – CDC study

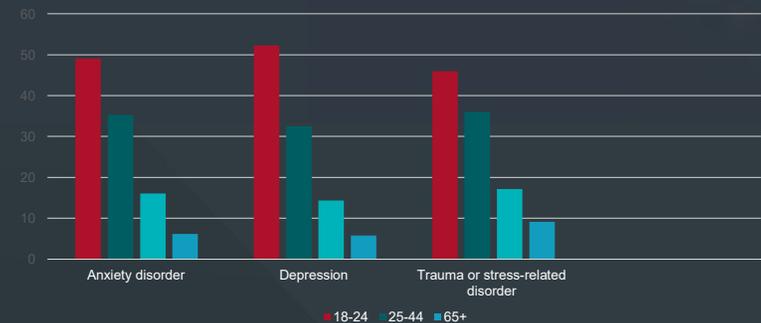
- 5412 survey respondents in the US
- June 24-30, 2020
- Compared to 2019 data
- Results
 - Higher anxiety (26% vs 8%)
 - Higher depression (24% vs 6.5%)
 - Higher rates of suicidal ideation (11% vs 4%)

Age and isolation

Which of the following age groups is most affected psychologically by the pandemic?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-44 years old
- 45-64 years old
- 65+ years old

CDC Survey June 24-30, 2020



CDC study results

- Mental health conditions are disproportionately affecting
 - Young adults
 - Hispanic persons
 - Black persons
 - Essential workers
 - Unpaid caregivers for adults
 - Those receiving psychiatric care
- "Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic" in MMWR August 14, 2020

CDC survey caveats

- Done relatively early in pandemic
- Did not look at
 - Persons with dementia or their caregivers
 - Persons living in assisted living or nursing homes

Comments on the CDC Survey

“Older adults may have traits of resilience that have enabled them to withstand the stresses of COVID-19, especially wisdom and a tendency to value the quality of a few close relationships over having many more superficial relationships.”

Comments on the CDC Survey

“Because of their past experience, many older people become wiser and more resilient. We should not patronize them but instead respect them and learn how they can still manage the adversities with such grit, emotional regulation, self-reflection, and compassion. They can be role models for younger patients as well as their caregivers.”

Dilip Jeste, MD

Nursing Home Survey

- Online national survey of nursing home residents
- Conducted by Altarum
- July-August 2020
- 365 respondents from 36 states
- Results:
 - 76% reported feeling more lonely
 - 64% reported not leaving their rooms
 - 93% reported not leaving the facility in a given week
 - 28% reported going outside for fresh air
 - 5% had visitors 3 or more times/week

Nursing Home Study: quotes

- "I have become more anxious and depressed due to the separation from my loved ones. I have little appetite and am losing weight."
- "I have increased confusion, weight loss, and sadness."
- "If the virus doesn't kill me the loneliness will."

Nursing Home Study: Recommendations

- Assess residents for loneliness
- Make isolation and loneliness a focus of Quality Assurance/ Performance Improvement Projects
- Provide residents with access to communication technology
- Encourage staff to focus on safely reintegrating residents into the larger community
- Support the staff

Post-traumatic stress disorder and COVID-19

- Interviews of 46 older adults with PTSD and 30 healthy trauma-exposed older adults living in NYC
- Done in April, 2020 as part of a larger ongoing study
- One of a small number of studies able to look at statistics both before and during the pandemic
- "The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Traumatic Stressor: Mental Health Responses of Older Adults with Chronic PTSD" in Am Journal Geriatric Psychiatry Febr 2021

PTSD study results

- Older adults with PTSD:
 - Were more likely to live alone (63% vs 37%)
 - Were more likely to experience a physical illness (37% vs 13%)
 - Spent more time viewing computer, smartphone or TV screens
 - Actually showed a decrease in PTSD scores during the pandemic

PTSD study results

- Those with PTSD, and non-PTSD controls
 - Were equally lonely (65% vs 63% scored high)
 - Spent about 2 hours/day watching TV news
 - Showed about the same depression scores compared to before the pandemic

PTSD study: conclusions

- PTSD in older adults did not appear to be related to more vulnerability to depression
- Older adults may have more coping strategies than younger adults

Suicide rates and national tragedies

- Some tragedies are associated with reduced suicide rates
 - Example: JFK assassination 1963
 - Challenger disaster in 1986
 - 9/11 in 2001 (subgroups)
- Common themes:
 - “Pulling together”
 - “In it together”
 - Part of a larger whole

Suicide rates and national tragedies

- Some tragedies are associated with an increase in suicide rate
 - Natural disasters
 - SARS epidemic in 2003 (older women in Hong Kong)
- Themes:
 - "Pulling apart"
 - Geographic displacement
 - Social distancing

Increase in suicide following an initial decline during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan

Takanobu Tanaka & Shohei Okamoto

Nature Human Behaviour 5, 229–238(2021) | [View this article](#)

52k Accesses | 1 Citations | 602 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

Abstract

There is increasing concern that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic could harm psychological health and exacerbate suicide risk. Here, based on month-level records of suicides covering the entire Japanese population in 1,848 administrative units, we assessed whether suicide mortality changed during the pandemic. Using difference-in-difference estimation, we found that monthly suicide rates declined by 14% during the first 5 months of the pandemic (February to June 2020). This could be due to a number of complex reasons, including the government's generous subsidies, reduced working hours and school closure. By contrast, monthly suicide rates increased by 16% during the second wave (July to October 2020), with a larger increase among females (37%) and children and adolescents (49%). Although adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may remain in the long term, its modifiers (such as government subsidies) may not be sustained. Thus, effective suicide prevention—particularly among vulnerable populations—should be an important public health consideration.

Trends in suicide during the covid-19 pandemic

Prevention must be prioritised while we wait for a clearer picture

Ann John,¹ Jane Pirkis,² David Gunnell,³ Louis Appleby,⁴ Jacqui Morrissey⁵

"Overall, the literature on the effect of covid-19 on suicide should be interpreted with caution. Most of the available publications are preprints, letters (neither is peer reviewed), or commentaries using news reports of deaths by suicide as the data source."

British Medical Journal November 2020

Questionnaire for assessing impact of COVID-19 on older adults

Free download at www.qiacpoa.com

1. How concerned are you about the covid-19 pandemic?
 Not at all Somewhat A lot Very concerned

2. Have you been diagnosed with covid-19 by a doctor or other health care provider?
 Yes No I'm not sure

3. How long have you been in the hospital?
 Less than 1 week 1-2 weeks 3-4 weeks 5-6 weeks 7-8 weeks 9-10 weeks More than 10 weeks

4. How often are you communicating with others?
 Daily Several times per week Once per week 2-3 times per month Rarely or never

5. How often are you social distancing (avoiding close contact with people, did you have regular contact with young children (generally defined as age 6 or younger)?
 Yes No I'm not sure

6. How often do you see your young (under 18) children?
 Daily Several times per week Once per week 2-3 times per month

7. How much has your sleep been interrupted or disturbed because of concern about the infection?
 Not at all Somewhat A lot

8. How often are you wearing a face mask?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

9. How often are you wearing gloves?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

10. How often are you avoiding public places?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

11. How often are you avoiding public places?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

12. How often are you avoiding public places?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

13. How often are you avoiding public places?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

14. How often are you avoiding public places?
 Always Often Sometimes Never

15. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
 Never Often Sometimes Never

16. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
 Never Often Sometimes Never

17. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
 Never Often Sometimes Never

18. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
 Never Often Sometimes Never

Technology

Ageism, COVID-19, and social media

In a study in the 10 days following the pandemic declaration:

- 25% of tweets downplayed the pandemic because it was deadlier among older persons
- 14% of tweets has offensive content or jokes

Source: Soto-Perez-de-Celis, 2020

Ageism and COVID-19

- Social media terms related to COVID-19 and older adults:
 - The Boomer Doomer
 - The Senior Deleter
 - The Elder Repeller
 - The Boomer Remover
 - Trending topic on Twitter, March 2020
 - Seen by some as the "purpose" of COVID-19
- "Are You OK, Boomer? Intensification of Ageism and Intergenerational Tensions on Social Media Amid COVID-19." Meisner in Leisure Sciences 2020

Tech

From telehealth visits to digital pharmacies, seniors have ramped up technology use during COVID-19: survey

by Heather Landi | Aug 5, 2020 9:00am



Prior to COVID-19 only 1 in 10 seniors used telemedicine. During COVID-19, 44% have used telemedicine and 43% say they intend on using it after. (via survey found: @genert@genert@genert@genert)

Barriers to using telehealth

- The digital divide/gap
- Familiarity and comfort with technology
- Sensory deficits
- Cognitive deficits

Wisdom

- Complex personality trait
- Components include
 - Empathy
 - Compassion*
 - Emotional regulation
 - Ability to self-reflect
 - Acceptance of uncertainty
 - Diversity of perspectives, social advising, and spirituality

*Inversely correlated with loneliness

"You might as well be happy while you're miserable!"

A long-term care resident (prior to the pandemic)

Helpful interventions



Mindfulness training reduces loneliness and increases social contact in a randomized controlled trial

Emily K. Lindsay¹, Shinzen Young², Kirk Warren Brown³, Joshua M. Smyth⁴, and J. David Creswell⁵

¹Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15213; ²Department of Psychiatry, University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine, Burlington, VT 05401; ³Department of Psychology, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284; ⁴Department of Biobehavioral Health, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802 and ⁵Department of Psychology, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Edited by Stephanie Cadopps, The University of Chicago, and accepted by Editorial Board Member Michael S. Gazzaniga January 3, 2019 (received for review August 7, 2018)

- Mobile phone-delivered mindfulness training program reduced loneliness, increased social activities
- Focus on present moment (instead of ruminating about the past, or worrying about the future)
- Mindful acceptance of what is
- Approach, rather than avoid, thoughts and emotions

Cognitive therapy model for social isolation

Basic concepts of cognitive (or cognitive-behavioral) therapy:

- Thoughts influence feelings
- We all have negative "automatic thoughts"
- We can learn to "talk back" to unhelpful thoughts

Example of a cognitive approach

Special Issue Article

Strategies to Promote Social Connections Among Older Adults During "Social Distancing" Restrictions

Kimberly A. Van Orden, Ph.D., Emily Bower, Ph.D., Julie Lutz, Ph.D., Caroline Silva, Ph.D., Autumn M. Gallegos, Ph.D., Carol A. Podgorski, Ph.D., Elizabeth J. Santos, M.D., Yeates Conwell, M.D.

Am J Geriatric Psychiatry May 2020

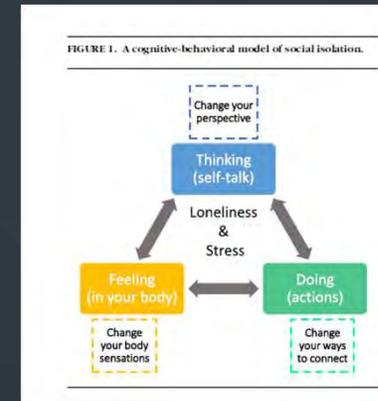
Helping Older People Engage: The HOPE Lab



The HOPE Lab

Example of a cognitive approach

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1. "What if I get sick and there is no one to help me?" | A. Guilt |
| 2. "I will become a burden on my children" | B. Fear |
| 3. "No one cares about me" | C. Sadness |



Change your perspective

1. How can I view the situation from a different perspective?
2. Think of someone optimistic whose opinion you highly value. How would they perceive the situation?
3. Remind yourself: Don't believe everything you think!

Change your body sensations

- Practice just noticing and tolerating feelings and body sensations instead of resisting them and pushing them away
- Create pleasant sensations for your five senses (music, pleasant scents, pet your dog or cat, look at art, sip tea)
- Warm up (hold warm towels, take a warm bath, sip warm tea)
- Cool down (splash your face with cold water)

Change your actions: Connect with something/someone

- Connect with nature, a higher power, or our shared humanity
 - Create art (ala Getty Museum challenge)
 - Get outside
 - Listen to music
 - Watch birds
- Connect with others
 - Help others: write letters, send emails, care for pets

Worksheet for Making a Connections Plan

1. Ways I can change my perspective:
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
2. Ways I can change how my body feels:
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
3. Ways I can connect:
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____

Case example: Applying the Connections Plan

- Mr X: 74-year-old widowed man
- Lives alone in an apartment
- Mobility problems (old hip fracture, poor vision)
- Main social contacts pre-COVID:
 - Twice-weekly Uber rides to church
 - Neighbor's children

- Mr. X feels lonely and isolated
- He worries he may be getting depressed
- Too much time on his hands
- Trouble distracting himself from negative thoughts and feelings
- Feels "forgotten" by neighbors and "never really mattered to them"
- Feels "useless" as he can't usher at church
- Gets anxious, sweaty, and has "racing heart" when he thinks about how long the pandemic may last or wonders if he can handle the stress

Mr. X: Changing perspective

- Feeling useless, forgotten, or that he "doesn't matter" to his neighbors:
 - "My neighbors haven't forgotten me. They could appreciate spending time with me, but circumstances out of their control make it difficult to visit"

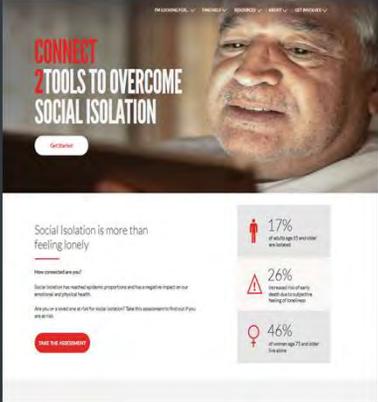
Mr. X: changing body sensations

- When he feels anxious, sweaty, and feels his heart racing:
 - Take 5 slow deep breaths
 - Imagine your childhood home

Mr. X: Connect with others

- Call neighbor and ask for help learning how to make video calls
 - Reads stories to neighbor's children by video
- Call church members who live alone once a week
 - "My wife would be shocked!"

Resources for social connection



CONNECT 2 TOOLS TO OVERCOME SOCIAL ISOLATION

Social Isolation is more than feeling lonely

17% of adults age 75 and older are isolated

26% increased risk of early death for those who are socially isolated

46% of those age 75 and older live alone

The Telephone Outreach Program

- Done by medical students in the Yale Geriatrics Student Interest Group
- Weekly 30-minute phone calls to long-term care residents at 3 New Haven nursing homes
- Facilitated by recreation directors
- Results:
 - Positive for LTC residents
 - Positive for student volunteers!

How can we help an older adult in long-term care?

- Reach out regularly via phone calls, emails, video chats, letters, cards, and drawings
 - Send them fun things to do, such as books, buzzles, crafts
 - Consider providing a tablet preloaded with video chatting apps
 - Visit when you can, safely
 - Volunteer
- "Older Americans were already in an epidemic before the pandemic began" by Jessica Roy, LA Times, Jan 25, 2021

Other resources

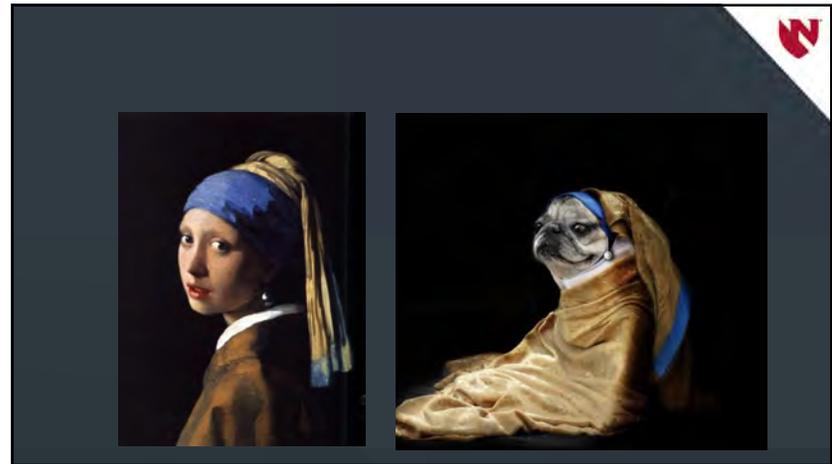
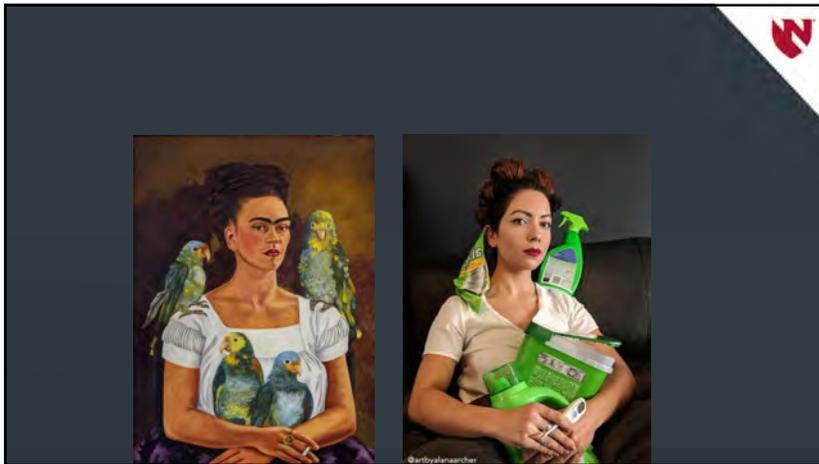


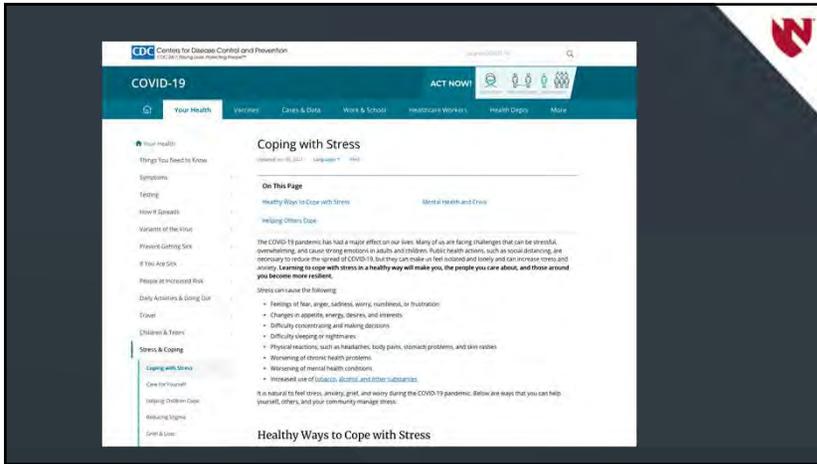
Getty @GettyMuseum

We challenge you to recreate a work of art with objects (and people) in your home.

- 1 Choose your favorite artwork
- 2 Find three things lying around your house
- 3 Recreate the artwork with those items

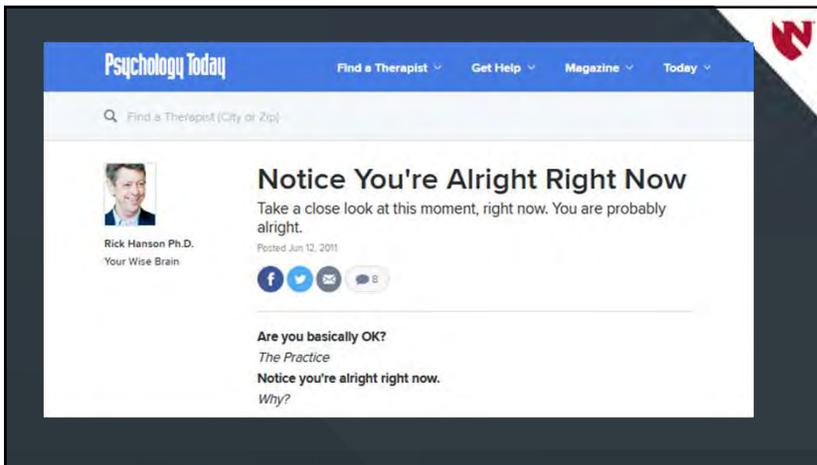
And share with us.





Some common reactions to stress

- Vague sense of unease
- Irritability, impatience
- Insomnia
- Physical symptoms



Other self-care tips

- Get enough sleep
- Get regular exercise
- Get outside
- Limit exposure to news, social media
- Keep a gratitude journal
- Check out the UNMC Wellness web page for more ideas

COVID Coach app

COVID Coach
A mobile application for Veterans, Servicemembers, and anyone affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Features:

- Education to help you improve your well-being during this global pandemic
- Tools for coping and self-care
- Trackers for mental health and personal goals
- Resources for additional support

Developed by the Mobile Mental Health Apps Team at the VA's National Center for PTSD.

Contact our team with feedback to help us improve this app:
MobileMentalHealth@va.gov

Learn more on the National Center for PTSD [website](#).




Insomnia Coach



What can we learn?

- Older adults are a heterogenous group
- Many appear to be riding out the storm
- Some are affected deeply
- Long-term consequences of the pandemic remain to be seen
- Age often brings wisdom; wisdom enhances resilience; resilience buffers stress
- Social connections matter – a lot