Loneliness and isolation vs resilience and wisdom: How are older adults faring in the pandemic and what can we learn from them?

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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

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- 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

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

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

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

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)

"Loneliness is a sickness."

Clinic patient
December 2020
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?

a. 18-24 years old
b. 25-44 years old
c. 45-64 years old
d. 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.”

Dilip Jeste, MD

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
"In other circumstances — hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, terrorist attacks — older adults have been shown to have a lot of resilience to trauma," said Sarah Lowe, an assistant professor at Yale University School of Public Health who studies the mental health effects of traumatic events.

"But COVID-19 is distinctive from other disasters because of its constellation of stressors, geographic spread and protracted duration," she continued. "And older adults are now cut off from many of the social and psychological resources that enable resilience because of their heightened risk."

"Get me out of here! I'm in prison."

A long-term care facility resident
February 2021

Sources of stress and sources of joy

Online survey of 825 older adults in the US
Administered March 22-23, 2020

"Older Adults’ Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic" in The Gerontologist, Sept 4, 2020
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

"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
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

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
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
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

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 Silver, Ph.D., Antonia M. Gallegos, Ph.D., Carol S. Podgorski, Ph.D., Elizabeth J. Santoro, M.D., Yeates Conwell, M.D.

Am J Geriatric Psychiatry May 2020

Helping Older People Engage: The HOPE Lab
Example of a cognitive approach

1. “What if I get sick and there is no one to help me?”
   A. Guilt
   B. Fear

2. “I will become a burden on my children”
   C. Sadness

3. “No one cares about me”

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

- Choose your favorite artwork
- Find three things lying around your house
- 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
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