

Supporting Our Older Adults: The Pandemic Brings the Challenges They Face Closer to Home

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Lynn Breuer gives a few ways to help older adults combat feelings of isolation.

2020 has been a year full of ... what exactly? Political unrest, violence in the streets, healthcare in crisis, the list goes on and on. And many of the older adults living through this challenging year are experiencing it in one of two ways; either with equanimity, because they truly have lived through worse, or with great trepidation, as trauma from those “worse times” is triggered and relived.

For the rest of us who don't yet qualify as older adults these past six months have given us an uncomfortable preview of some of the challenges older adults face, not just during a pandemic, but every day.

For example, spending tremendous amounts of time at home, often alone. Seeing and talking with loved ones rarely, and even then, only by telephone or computer screen. Sharing a holiday meal with only members of our own households. Relying on others to shop for groceries and other necessities, and worrying about being a burden.

For older adults, this sense of isolation, vulnerability and dependence is not temporary, but is woven into the fabric of daily life. Whether caused by adult children moving out of state or outliving friends and family, those who are blessed to live a long life often find their social circles getting smaller as they age. Though the causes may differ from our present circumstances (pandemic isolation vs. no longer able to drive for example), the consequences are identical ... feelings of loneliness, vulnerability and uncertainty about the future.

Not surprisingly, for some, these painful feelings may lead to struggles with depression and anxiety. To add insult to injury, cognitive loss often follows, not because of genetic predisposition for dementia, but simply as a result of not needing to use our words as often, not relying on our visual-spatial skills to navigate crowded places, not needing to focus our attention and tune out distraction. Our cognitive skills can weaken without frequent use, much as muscles atrophy and weaken after weeks of inactivity.

So the question is this: Now that we know, intimately, the trials many older adults face, what can we do about it? How can we continue to help not only in the short term as the pandemic seems to be here for the foreseeable future, but also in the long run?

To start, we can ask the older adults in our lives what they need, what would make the most difference for them and ask them to help identify the best use of time together. In addition to helping with the necessities, a project, whether done together or solo can help ward off feelings of isolation and boredom. Older adults who are comfortable with technology can access platforms like Zoom in order to stay connected and engage in learning. Many older adults are also family historians, both keepers of family stories as well as names and relationships of people in that box of old family photos.

Ways to help older adults combat feelings of isolation:

- Call for no reason at all, just to let them know you are thinking about them
- Validate their experience and let them know they are not alone
- Encourage them to reach out to others
- Stress that they are not a burden
- Send cards when you can't be there in person
- Teach an older adult how to access Zoom, email, family member's social media

Projects older adults can work on at home:

- Collect and organize favorite family recipes
- Create a legacy book of their life story using a web-based service, such as StoryWorth
- Bring back the pleasure of reading thanks to adjustable font sizes on an iPad or Kindle
- Label the back of old photographs
- Spend time outdoors in nature while weather and health permits



Lynn Breuer

- Turn hobbies into volunteer projects such as knitting or crocheting hats to donate to homeless shelters or cancer centers

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