

## COPING WITH COVID-19 MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES FOR OLDER ADULTS

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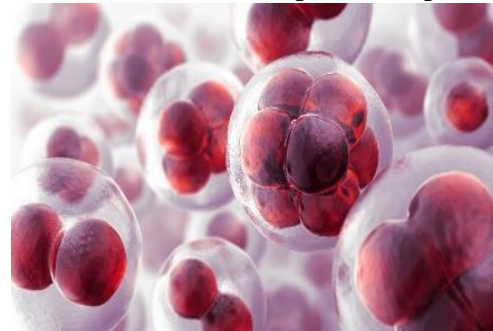
*“We challenge you to step up and share your time.”*

Millions of older adults across the U.S. struggle with loneliness, isolation, and lack of regular companionship. Chronic loneliness negatively affects both physical and mental health outcomes and can even be lethal.



Researchers have found social isolation and loneliness are twice as likely as obesity to be harmful to both physical and mental health, and lack of social connection may heighten health risks as much as having an alcohol use disorder or smoking 15 cigarettes per day. For socially isolated older adults, this risky pathway can become lethal.

isolated, and alone. Older adults know about the global shortage of ventilators and are seeing in real-time Italian health care providers prioritize the lives



of younger and healthier persons. One can understand how, when faced with these stark realities,

homebound older adults can feel further isolated, hopeless, and in need of mental health services. Even older persons who have been actively engaged with their community are also experiencing isolation since many senior centers have closed. Those normal avenues for socialization and linkage to services are now increasingly unavailable in order to protect the physical health of seniors.

### ACCESS TO CARE

Due to the pandemic, even access to health care is limited, which may exacerbate feeling vulnerable,



## Mental Health Strains

The ensuing mental health strain caused by social distancing only compounds the problem since mental

health care has historically been difficult for older adults to access. Mental Health professions have not prioritized working with older adults; for example, only 1.2% of psychologists describe geropsychology as a specialty area. Due to Medicare regulations last updated in 1989, there are 200,000 Licensed Professional Counselors (LPCs) that are restricted from working with older adults and people with long-term disabilities, even during the current crisis. The lack of available mental health services means that social isolation and loneliness may persist.

## Interesting Times

These are interesting times when everyone is facing the challenge of maintaining physical distance while trying to remain socially connected to friends and loved ones. For certain older adults with a history of social isolation and loneliness, the current phase of



social distancing may be dangerous. But there is hope! Now that many of us are sitting at home, why don't we put that time to

good use? We challenge you to step up and share your time.

## Strategies to help with Loneliness and Isolation

- Read a book for fun.
- Call a friend or family member.
- Take a break from watching the news and watch a funny movie.
- Play games on your cell phone.
- Exercise in the home.
- Take a walk around the block or around your yard. Nature invigorates you.
- Learn a new hobby through a book or a video.
- Volunteer to sew masks for a nonprofit agency.
- Rediscover your favorite music and have your own dance party.
- Contact a Mental Health Professional. Many are doing telehealth sessions and are covered by insurance.

## Family and Friend Support

- Check on the elderly people in your life.
- Call elderly family and friends.
- Send a thinking of you card, gifts, flowers, etc. Send them food from a restaurant or do a grocery pick up.
- Chalk a message or picture outside the house of a homebound senior to brighten their day.
- Offer to care for their yard.

For General Health Information: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)  
 TN COVID-19 Information: <https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/ncov.html>  
 TN Mental Health Hotline: 1-855-274-7471  
 TN Addiction and Recovery Hotline: 1-800-889-9789

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