

COVID-19 Tip Sheet for Long-Term Care Settings: Combating Loneliness through the Holidays

December 2020



There are many reasons why people experience loneliness. Isolation is not always the main cause of loneliness. Individuals can sometimes feel lonely even in groups and when around others.¹ It is common for older adults to feel lonely, especially in a long-term care facility when they may be surrounded by others, but not closely connected to them. Approximately 4% to 9% of older adults in long-term care settings suffer from constant loneliness, and an additional one third may experience some degree of loneliness.¹ There are similar outcomes for people with developmental disabilities who receive support services in long-term care settings.



Why it Matters

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, social isolation has intensified for older adults residing in long-term care facilities, as well as those living in their own homes with daily supports provided by a residential agency. They may be isolated in their room or home and cannot participate in communal meals or activities. Limited contact with others, such as neighbors, staff, and outside family and friends, also leads to increased feelings of loneliness.² When social support and resilience are improved, the rates of loneliness and depressive symptoms lessen for older adults in long-term care facilities.³



Risk Factors

Certain pre-existing characteristics and conditions can make loneliness more common for those in long-term care settings. Some are:¹

- Female gender
- Limited income
- Recent loss of loved ones
- Disabilities
- Poor health
- Cognitive decline

Tips for Combating Loneliness and Isolation

Families, caregivers, and facility staff can share these tips with older adults and individuals with disabilities receiving long-term care to help combat loneliness and isolation. Safe Start guidelines and social distancing measures should be followed while using these tips.

Create and maintain connection¹

- Work on maintaining connections within your living setting (with neighboring patients, staff, etc.).
- Remember that you are not alone. Many other residents are experiencing similar challenges and emotions. It is important to empower each other by sharing this information and discussing common experiences. Reach out by greeting others, checking on how they are doing, and sending notes.
- Spend time with an animal or other companion. Research shows that interventions using animals or robots may alleviate loneliness.

Create ways to store and share memories⁴

- Write to friends, family, and staff.
- Consider starting a journal.
- Write stories from your childhood and other times during your life.
- Create a scrapbook of photos.

Engage in therapy or pastoral counseling³

- Consider psychological counseling, meeting with clergy or spiritual directors, or other forms of support.
- Consider forming or joining support groups (using remote meeting technology, when necessary) to share experiences and challenges.

Maintain or start recreational and educational interests^{5,6}

- Stay as physically active as possible.
- Start a new hobby or renew one you formerly enjoyed.
- Make gifts for friends, family, and staff.
- Teach something you know to another person, such as knitting, crocheting, gardening, or painting.
- Learn a new hobby or skill from someone you know.
- Begin or join a (remote) book club.
- Start a movie night (using remote meeting technology, when necessary) followed by review and discussion.
- Start a garden.

Participate in holiday traditions or make new ones^{1,7}

- Play or listen to music.
- Engage in gift exchanges.
- Watch holiday movies.
- Attend religious services or engage in other spiritual practices.
- Call or video chat with friends or relatives at a special time (like a meal) or for a special occasion.
- Share feelings and experiences from previous holiday traditions, celebrations, or special events.
- Check in with others who also may feel isolated or lonely.
- Listen to and support those for whom you care about.



COVID-19 Behavioral Health Group
Behavioral Health Strike Team
Washington State Department of Health
Web: doh.wa.gov/covid19/behavioralhealth

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