

Strategies for social connection among isolated older adults



What you need to know

- The authors present a model for social connectedness that focuses on how older adults can change their thinking, feeling and connections to reduce their distress during periods of isolation.
- Service providers and older adults can build a “Connections Plan” to develop coping strategies for preventing or managing social isolation during periods of isolation.
- Printable handouts and a worksheet are included to support implementation.

Social connections are important for older adults’ physical health, mental health and overall quality of life. Yet, during the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults are more likely to experience social isolation. To address the loneliness and stress of social isolation, the [HOPE Lab](#) (Helping Older People Engage) created a cognitive-behavioral model and tools to promote social connections in later life. In the special issues article, “Strategies to Promote Social Connections Among Older Adults During ‘Social Distancing’ Restrictions,” the authors provide an overview of the model as well as effective strategies and tools, such as a “Connections Plan,” that service providers can immediately apply to their work with older adults.

A cognitive-behavioural model of social connectedness

For many older adults, the idea of being intentional about social connection is an unfamiliar concept, and there are many emotional barriers to changing behaviours. Service providers can use the cognitive-behavioural model of social connectedness to shift the way older adults think about social connection.

Providers can use the model to support older adults in recognizing that the loneliness

and stress they experience in social isolation is due to both objective circumstances (e.g., disability, few social ties, barriers to socializing/physical distancing measures) and subjective perceptions (e.g, thinking they are always alone, feeling useless). The authors present three interdependent components in a cognitive-behavioural model of social connectedness:

- thinking (self-talk): changing your perspective
- feeling (in your body): changing your body sensations
- doing (actions): changing the ways you connect.

Supporting older adults to view social connection from this perspective can give them a sense of control over the situation and help tailored strategies to reduce their distress.

What is a “Connections Plan”?

A “Connections Plan” is a plan that service providers and older adults can build together—even over the phone. It uses the cognitive-behavioural model to develop coping strategies for preventing or managing social isolation during periods of isolation.



The plan is flexible. It can be used by many professionals who work with older adults and adapted for different community and health settings. For example, it can be used by care managers who work in Senior Active Living Centres or occupational therapists in nursing homes.

Service providers supporting older adults on the phone can mail or email support materials before connecting or share their screen when videoconferencing.

The following support materials can be used as part of a “Connections Plan”:

- **Apart, not alone: Why connection matters in later life (PDF)**

This handout can be widely distributed to older adults. It introduces the concept of social connections and provides strategies for making connections that are based on the cognitive-behavioural model (ways to change ones thinking, feeling and doing).

- **Matching thoughts to emotions exercise ([PDF](#))**

This exercise is a helpful way to discuss the relationship between thoughts and feelings with older adults. It shows how different interpretations of being alone during social distancing restrictions can lead to different thoughts and emotional reactions.

- **A fillable “Connections Plan” template ([PDF](#))**

Considerations for using a “Connections Plan”

A “Connections Plan” is a simple and useful tool for service providers to provide support in person or remotely. Below are a number of practical considerations for using a “Connections Plan.”

Understanding barriers to connection

- Ask open-ended questions. The [Questionnaire for Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Older Adults](#) provides questions to help understand older adults’ barriers to social connection.
- Use strengths-based language, which focuses more on the skills and support the person has rather than words that are interpreted as problems. For example, rather than using words like “loneliness,” ask about older adults’ relationships.
- Don’t assume which connections are important to older adults.
- Recognize that how older adults engage with others is often shaped by their upbringing and culture.
- Give older adults time to answer these questions as it may be new to them.
- Identify what might make older adults hesitant to change. For example, ask, “When you think about [calling X hotline] what emotions do you feel?”

Explaining the cognitive-behavioural model

- Use external examples (refer to the *Matching thoughts to emotions exercise* handout) to help explain how perceptions impact stress and loneliness. This allow older adults to focus on the process rather than the fixating on the content of their thoughts.
- Share examples to challenge thoughts, feelings and actions (refer to the *Apart, not alone: Why connection matters in later life* handout).



Improving implementation of a “Connections Plan”

- Use leading questions and prompts to help older adults identify potential strategies themselves instead of offering advice.
- Involve family members in the process when possible and share with them the principles of the cognitive-behavioral model.

During a time of uncertainty and physical distancing, it is essential to use evidence-informed practices to promote social connection in later life. A “Connections Plan” brings together techniques that service providers already use in a straight-forward way so that it can be immediately used to support isolated older adults.

About the authors

Kimberly A. Van Orden,¹ Emily Bower,¹ Julie Lutz,¹ Caroline Silva,¹ Autumn M. Gallegos,¹ Carol A. Podgorski,¹ Elizabeth J. Santos,¹ and Yeates Conwell¹

1. Department of Psychiatry, University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry, Rochester, NY, United States

This *Evidence Snapshot* is based on the article, “Strategies to Promote Social Connections Among Older Adults During ‘Social Distancing’ Restrictions,” which was published in the *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* in 2020. This summary was written by Beth White. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2020.05.004>

Apart, not alone: Why connection matters in later life



What does social connection mean?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing is important for your physical health. However, social connection is just as important for your well-being.

There are three important parts to social connection:



how often and who you connect with



the support you get from your connections (e.g., for physical or emotional support or for learning new information)



how you feel about our connections (e.g., feeling lonely or a sense of belonging).

Social connection is when you connect with other people, either in person or from afar. For example, you can connect with friends, family, neighbours, pen pals or even grocery store workers. You can also support your well-being with other types of connection, such as connecting with animals, with nature or through your faith.

Why do meaningful connections in later life matter?

Meaningful connections are important for your physical health, mental health and quality of life.

What connections are meaningful to you might be different from connections that are meaningful to your friends or family. Consider speaking with your healthcare provider about what this means to you. Together, you can build a plan for making meaningful connections.

Other ways to find connection

If you are feeling lonely or isolated, there are many ways to support your mental health. Below are a few suggestions on how you can change your thinking, feeling and doing.



Thinking: Changing your perspective

- **Ask yourself:** “How can I view the situation from a different perspective?” or “How would someone I think highly of view this situation?”
- **Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness is when you approach your thoughts and emotions, rather than avoid them. You then accept those thoughts without judgement. Ask your healthcare provider about simple mindfulness practices you can try from home. For three simple steps you can take in mindfulness, visit: positivepsychology.com/wp-content/uploads/3-Step-Mindfulness-Worksheet.pdf
- **Write down your thoughts:** List reasons that support the thought and reasons that challenge that thought. For example, a reason to challenge the thought “no one cares about me” could be “friends and family are protecting my health by not visiting”.



Feeling: Changing your body sensations

- **Soothe all five senses:** Listen to music, smell freshly baked cookies, pet your dog/cat, look at artwork, taste your favourite food.
- **Practice calming activities:** Try deep breathing exercises, muscle relaxation or imagining relaxing images. For detailed guidance, visit: www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Relaxation_Techniques_to_Relieve_Stress.pdf
Ask your health provider about other exercises you can try from home.

- **Change your temperature:** Warm up by taking a bath or sipping warm tea. Cool down by splashing cold water on your face or holding an ice cube.



Doing: Connecting with others in new ways



- **Focus on helping others:** Volunteer remotely (e.g., write letters to someone living in a nursing home) or take care of a neighbour's pet or plants.
- **Connect with people in safe ways:** Call loved ones, look at photographs or call friendly lines for support.
A Friendly Voice (1-855-892-9992) is a phone line for older adults in Ontario to hear a friendly voice.
ConnexOntario (1-866-531-2600) is a free phone line to learn about mental health services in Ontario.
- **Remind yourself of a shared humanity:** Connect with nature (e.g., watching birds or looking at flowers), make art or listen to music.

While you may be apart from loved ones, you are not alone. These are just a few of the steps you can take to challenge your thoughts and feeling and make meaningful connections. Talk to your healthcare provide about how you can build a plan to cope with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This handout is based on Van Orden et al.'s (2020) article "Strategies to Promote Social Connections among Older Adults during 'Social Distancing' Restrictions."

Matching thoughts to emotions exercise



This exercise is a helpful way to discuss the relationship between thoughts and feelings. It shows how different interpretations of being alone can lead to different thoughts and emotions.

Thoughts
What if I get sick and there's no one to help me?
I will become a burden on my son.
No one cares about me.

Emotions
Guilt
Fear
Sadness

My connections plan



1. Ways I can change my perspective:

- a. _____

- b. _____

- c. _____

2. Ways I can change how my body feels:

- a. _____

- b. _____

- c. _____

3. Ways I can connect:

- a. _____

- b. _____

- c. _____

This handout is from Van Orden et al.'s (2020) article "Strategies to Promote Social Connections among Older Adults during 'Social Distancing' Restrictions." It is intended to be completed with the support of a service provider. For more details on how to use this tool, visit: www.eenet.ca/resource/social-connection-isolated-older-adults.