

Social Isolation Spotlight in Long-Term Care

Social Isolation

Social isolation is the state in which an individual has **few** social relationships or **infrequent** social **contact** with others. It can bring on feelings of **loneliness**, which can significantly impact one's **health** and **wellbeing**.

Feelings of loneliness can bring on an increased risk of depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, aggressive behaviours, and many other mental health implications. The absence of a significant person, group, or network can bring on feelings of loneliness and isolation, which has severe consequences for individuals.

COVID-19 and Family Engagement

As COVID-19 rapidly spread around the globe, government officials introduced public health measures to “stay at home” and “social distance”. For individuals who are already vulnerable, this meant to isolate in order to protect themselves. In particular, long-term care homes introduced visitation restrictions and measures that stop others from entering facilities unless they are essential workers. Activities within homes were also cancelled such as group activities and communal dining.

In summary, residents were abruptly limited to the walls of their rooms in order to decrease the risk of spreading the COVID-19 infection. Many long-term care homes were not prepared to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic on mental health, which results in residents and their families to be significantly impacted.

Family members often visited their loved ones in long-term care homes and played an integral role in their care and maintaining family connections. This impacted resident as their families often brought food, spent time with them, and assisted in caregiving. This further disadvantaged residents who are cognitively impaired and have dementia, as the lack of seeing their family members and friends may result in them no longer recognizing them.

Family and Resident Experiences in Long Term Care

Through an online questionnaire by Family Councils Ontario, 25 family members identified experiences in the sector throughout the ongoing pandemic.

One family member noted that their mother who is a resident in a long-term care home spent almost six weeks in isolation on and off due to circumstances beyond their control. Upon admission, the resident was required to complete a two-week isolation period, followed by

another two weeks due to the ill health of her room-mate, and then another two-week isolation period due to the positive diagnosis of a staff member. The family member brought to light how the impact of isolation has been extremely detrimental to residents as there are no strategies to deal with the psycho-social needs of residents after more than a year in the pandemic.

Another family member shared the experience of their father who is in long-term care and diagnosed with COVID-19 in March 2020. The only way for family to connect was through a staff member's iPad which was not a dependable way of communication due to the changing staff schedules and instability of internet connection. The family member brought to light that there needs to be greater advocacy for more standard care-home owned devices and Wi-Fi reception, given that family members were not allowed into homes to drop off devices. The family member noted that having digital access is crucial in times like this as it can be a way to check up on residents, engage with them, and keep them updated about life outside the home.

It was also noted by a family member that feelings of concern were heightened due to the lack of communication from the home their father was in. Family members had no idea what state their loved one was in, and whether they were having interactions with others in the home. This resulted in the acceleration of cognitive degeneration as their family just had a TV as a non-interactive way of entertainment. This resulted into moments of repetitive depression which was hard for their father to cope with.

Another respondent brought the staffing issue to light as the rotation of staff was a disturbance to their father and other residents in the long-term care home. In particular, new staff on the floor who were not familiar with the residents resulted in inconsistency in interactions. The family member noted that when one becomes older, there is a strong need for more consistency in the lives of older adults, especially in institutions since the frontline staff are often the people that residents interact with on a daily basis.

Overall, many of the respondents touched base on how not only their loved ones in homes were impacted, but also family members outside of the home. Due to the lack of communication and interaction, this resulted in depression and separation anxiety for both parties. Social isolation and lack of support from homes resulted in further health consequences on the residents as there was a lack of mental and social stimulation.

Recommendations for assisting families and residents to restore normalcy and positive engagement in long-term care communities

COVID-19 has brought issues within the long-term care sector to the forefront, that have significantly impacted the social isolation and loneliness of residents. Families and residents can work towards overcoming the trials of the pandemic and restore normalcy and positive engagement in long-term care communities by implementing various recommendations.

- **Phone calls**
 - Regular phone calls with family members, or implementing a friendly phone call program with volunteers
- **Accessible technology for video calls**
 - Zoom, Skype, Facetime allow for family members to coordinate video calls to help them stay connected
- **Sending cards, letters, artwork**
 - Mailed letters, cards, and artwork from family members can help residents feel engaged with family members
- **Providing religious and cultural services via technology**
 - Services accessible through technology that provides opportunities for residents to engage in religious and cultural services
- **Opportunities for creative expression**
 - Therapeutic activities to support emotional and cognitive functioning that allows residents to use creative expression which may improve social engagement
- **Exercise**
 - Studies have found a link between social connection and exercise, which reported improvement in social relationships and social participation
- **Pet interaction and animal-assisted therapy**
 - Pet interaction can have beneficial impacts on social connections
 - Previous studies have shown that robotic animals may be effective in reducing feelings of loneliness of older adults in care settings
- **Laugh therapy**
 - The use of laughter and yoga breathing techniques
- **Reminiscing about past memories**
 - Reminiscence therapy may increase social engagement, interaction, social networks that can overall help decrease feelings of loneliness

Best Practices for Family Councils

A Family Council is a source of peer support to other families as they understand what other family members are experiencing. Family Councils can give and receive emotional, informational, and practical support to members who have lost a loved one, or have a family member who deteriorated greatly from social isolation and mental health concerns. Family Councils can share thoughts, feelings, and concerns with others who are in the same situation to help them cope and form positive partnerships.

Family Councils can also provide support for each other through advocacy, and taking collective concerns to facilities. This can include suggestions for new programs and activities that can reduce the social isolation of their loved ones in long-term care homes, ultimately improving their quality of life.

References

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