

LETTERS

Long-term social distancing during COVID-19: A social isolation crisis among seniors?

Although we agree with the long-term necessity of social distancing during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic,¹ we posit that social distancing among seniors, without insight into its potential consequences, can arguably be equivalent to social isolation, defined as the deprivation of social connectedness.

Social isolation among seniors had already become a public health crisis before the COVID-19 pandemic.² Long-term social distancing, although necessary, will undoubtedly worsen this crisis and pose unique challenges for seniors. As public spaces close and visitor restrictions are imposed by different institutions, seniors who live at home alone or in residential facilities are cut off abruptly from society, with no contingency plan in place. This is problematic, especially considering the strong associations of social isolation with depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation.^{3,4} It is thus crucial to mitigate the negative effects of social distancing on seniors.

The solution? Invest in physically distant human connection. Although technology has been shown to be effective,⁵ disparities in its access and use among seniors are problematic. Consequently, a multipronged approach involving numerous stakeholders is required. In residential homes, hallway activities (e.g., bingo, live concerts and dance sessions) with residents by their doorway, maintaining 6-foot distance in a small-group setting, can be organized. In the community, volunteers can provide companionship through daily telephone calls and online support programs. In academia and medicine, researchers and clinicians should maintain regular virtual contact and identify areas of need. Public health efforts must focus on raising awareness and implementing and expanding mental health programs.

Our social relationships exist out in the ethereal world of emotion, words and connection — all of which are not synonymous with physical closeness. As the COVID-19 pandemic progresses, we must work together to mitigate the negative effects of social distancing among seniors, before it becomes a chronic problem.

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■ Cite as: CMAJ 2020 May 25;192:E588.
doi: 10.1503/cmaj.75428

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Competing interests: None declared.