



COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:

FAMILIES OF OLDER ADULTS

Version 1, 4/20/20

The COVID-19 outbreak is taking a toll on society, and stress and fear are common during these challenging times. If you are a family member of an older adult, you may be feeling a tremendous sense of responsibility to make sure that your loved one stays out of harm's way. You also may be very worried and concerned about them because you are unable to visit them due to the shelter-in-place restrictions. You may also have difficulty connecting with them if they are not comfortable with technology. The common unpleasant feelings that can come with caregiving stress, such as guilt, helplessness, frustration, anger, anxiety, powerlessness, and sadness, may be more intense during this difficult time as providing optimal caregiving is more challenging. Here are some tips for families of older adults who are trying their best to stay connected to their loved ones and keep their loved ones safe. We offer separate tips for family members based on where and how close they live to their older adult loved one, and if their older adult loved one has cognitive problems or dementia. Helpful resources for you and your family members are also included.

Provide Loving and Helpful Care for Older Family Members Who Live at Home and Nearby

- Determine as a family how much contact is comfortable and safe
 - Discuss with all relevant parties to weigh the risks versus benefits of physical contact based on your family values and circumstances
- Offer practical support when needed when possible
 - Help to make sure they have the supplies and resources they need to last 2-4 weeks, like food and medications
 - Give them the items directly
 - Drop the supplies outside their residence
 - Have supplies delivered to them
 - Help them continue to be stocked up on basic supplies (e.g., toothpaste, canned goods, nonperishable food)
 - Cook them meals they can freeze
 - Include them in any grocery, pharmacy, and errand runs that you make in person or online



- Offer emotional support
 - Call or connect with your loved one in ways that express care, concern, and love
- Know your caregiving limits
 - Be compassionate toward yourself with regard to how much caregiving you can provide your older adult loved one, recognizing that you may have simultaneously caregiving demands (e.g., for children) or other types of universal stressors (e.g., work, finances) and try not to judge yourself for “falling short” for this additional caregiving role
 - Talk to other family members, friends, or someone through your workplace employee assistance program (if applicable) about the right amount of caregiving responsibilities for you
 - Know that your feelings towards being a capable caregiver may vary by the week or day
 - Be authentic and honest with your family members about the amount of caregiving you are able to provide
 - Remember that emotional support “counts” even when you cannot offer practical assistance

Provide Loving and Helpful Care for an Older Family Member who Lives at Home, but at a Distance from You

- Call your family member and ask them what they would like and what would be most helpful for them
 - Do not make assumptions about what they need
 - Be kind toward yourself and don't see yourself as a “failure” who is not taking care of your loved one adequately
- Be mindful of hypervigilance and scrutiny of your family members' choices
 - Communicate your viewpoint once or twice if they engage in activities you do not feel comfortable with (e.g., go out without a mask) and then let it go or revisit only when more or new information becomes available (as the evidence-base for COVID-19 is continually changing)
 - Convey that your concerns about their actions are because you care about and love them and want them to stay as healthy as possible
 - Turn to trusted others to obtain support for any frustrations or other challenging emotional experiences this distance and lack of perceived control is



activating for you – it is hard to watch someone you love make choices that you do not agree with and may be endangering their own, or someone else's, health.

- Spend time on the phone teaching them to increase their utilization of technology, if they are interested and capable
- Ask for numbers to speak with neighbors or local friends to help them get the supplies and resources that they need, if this would be helpful
- Encourage them to establish local emergency contacts who they can call with concerns or requests for help
 - Suggest they keep these contacts visible (in their place of residence, on their phone) in case they become ill
 - Recommend they share a key to their residence with someone they trust and ensure that this person has your number

Provide Loving and Helpful Care for Older Family Members in Assisted Living/Nursing Care

- Respect safety guidelines established by the property's administration - this may mean not visiting your loved one at their residence
- Know that experiencing intense waves of emotions such as sadness, helplessness, and fear are normal and understandable when you can not see your loved one
- Use video chats such as FaceTime to connect with your loved one, possibly with the help of people at the facility
 - Recognize that older adults who have a cognitive disorder may not respond to your visual cues, but it might bring you and your family member comfort and peace of mind to “see” one another or “hear” one another
- Obtain information from the care facility about their plan for updating family members and make sure you are on all relevant emails
- Ask your network of family and friends to call or mail letters, cards, or children's artwork on a regular basis to help your loved one feel remembered and connected
- Consider going to the care facility and staying outside your loved one's window or glass door so they can see you from a safe place
 - Determine if this is best for your loved one – if they have a cognitive impairment, will seeing you from a distance bring more distress or more comfort?



Provide Loving and Helpful Care for a Loved One with Dementia or Cognitive Impairment

- Be mindful that caregiving is particularly difficult with loved ones who have cognitive problems (Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, stroke history, etc.), as they may not remember or understand that the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting their daily routines and may need guidance to stay safe
- Recognize that it will be challenging for your loved one to fully grasp the reasons for what's going on
 - Find short, simple explanations that you can repeat when they ask questions (e.g., if they ask why they're not going to the hair salon, you can say, "They're closed this week. They rescheduled for next week" (even if they didn't); if they ask why your son didn't come to visit, you can say, "His wife is sick (even if she isn't). They're going to video chat with us today instead.")
 - Spare them the stress of unsuccessfully trying to understand this temporary, extreme, and confusing reality
- Validate their emotions if they struggle with necessary changes (e.g., "You're right, it's frustrating that we can't go to church today. I want to go too.")
- Find short, reassurances that you can repeat when your loved one is scared, which is common if they have memory or cognitive problems (e.g., "We are stocked with everything we need and are very safe here" or "The kids are all fine. We will talk to them tonight at 6.")
- Reach out to your loved one's healthcare providers if they become irritable or dysregulated to the point you have difficulty managing them
 - Determine if their healthcare providers are offering telemedicine
 - Ask their healthcare provider to determine if a medication adjustment, even temporarily, may relieve some of the behaviors being exacerbated by social distancing
- Engage your loved one in activities they can still do
 - Encourage them to take a walk, do yard work, care for pets, clean, do crafts, watch TV/movies, listen to music, pray, go for a drive, or talk to friends/family on the phone
 - Encourage your loved one to get outdoors on a regular basis - sunlight and physical movement help regulate sleep and mood, even for those with cognitive disorders



- Limit the amount of news and media in the house, especially if you find that constant coverage of COVID-19 is impacting your or your loved one's mood
- Add some lighter TV shows or movies, especially comedies that make you and/or your loved one laugh
 - Remember, it's ok to watch the same things repeatedly if they make your loved one smile – have them use headphones if you don't want to hear it every time
- Remember, it's ok if their world becomes smaller right now - that's happening for everyone

Take Care of Yourself

- Take caregiving day-by-day (or hour-by-hour)
- Practice self-compassion
 - Be gentle with yourself if you feel overwhelmed by the extra challenges and complexities of caregiving during COVID-19
 - Recognize that it is natural to feel more anxious, irritable, or lonely right now
 - Forgive yourself for the things you are unable to do to help your loved one
- Get support for yourself - caregivers deserve care, attention, and rest as well.
 - Lean on trusted friends, family, spiritual leaders for emotional support through phone or video calls
 - Consider working with a therapist or counselor via teletherapy
 - Reach out to the Alzheimer's Association, which offers free support to caregivers (National hotline - 1-800-272-3900)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention's "COVID-19: What Older Adults Need to Know" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjcoN9Aek24&feature=youtu.be&deliveryName=DM22660>
- The Institute on Aging's Friendship Line (1-800-971-0016) is an accredited crisis line for people age 60 and over and adults with disabilities that provides warm, supportive conversation for older adults who may be experiencing depression or isolation - <https://www.ioaging.org/services/all-inclusive-health-care/friendship-line/>
- The Institute on Aging has compiled resources and thoughtful reading for caregivers who want to help their loved ones become more comfortable with and take advantage of technology - <https://www.ioaging.org/the-2018-guide-to-best-technol->



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- Area Agencies on Aging connect callers with resources and services for older persons and people with disabilities throughout Georgia - <https://aging.georgia.gov/locations>
- The Alzheimer's Association is an excellent resource for caregivers who may be concerned about staying healthy when caring for a loved one with dementia - [https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/coronavirus-\(covid-19\)-tips-for-dementia-care](https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/coronavirus-(covid-19)-tips-for-dementia-care)
- American Parkinson's Disease Association provides education and support to people affected by Parkinson's Disease and offers free online exercise, educational and support opportunities - <https://www.apdaparkinson.org/article/covid-19-overview-for-pd-community/>
- [Emory Alzheimer's Disease Research Center offers information on Alzheimer's and related diseases as well as caregiver education and support.](http://alzheimers.emory.edu/)
- You can find a local attorney specially trained in the legal and financial planning needs of older adults and persons with disabilities at the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys or the Life Care Planning Law Firms Association, <https://www.naela.org/>, <https://www.lcplfa.org/>
- Encourage exercise by tuning into these workout videos for older adults put out by the YMCA - <https://ymca360.org/on-demand#/category/14>