

How Do Seniors Shelter in Place without Feeling Alone or Isolated?

By Sandy Rosenholz, Senior Resources CA, Inc.

Dealing with the COVID-19 crisis is challenging enough for most of us who must stay home and shelter in place without the option of going to school, work, the golf course, the mall, or visiting friends or family, but seniors face even more obstacles. Many have underlying health conditions or suppressed immune systems that make them extra vulnerable to COVID 19, and are afraid that socializing will bring on those devastating health concerns. On the flip side, seniors are also among the most likely to feel cut off from family and friends. How can they avoid feeling desperate while keeping a social distance with others?

That seems to be the \$64,000 question. And it is even more of a concern for those who live alone, about a third of the senior population, says the Administration for Community Living's Administration on Aging. Whether they live independently or have caregiver assistance, drastic changes to their routine can be both physically and emotionally devastating.

The Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, found that social isolation and loneliness can be more dangerous to a senior's health than obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Other research studies have reported:

- Increases in heart attacks (29%) and strokes (32%) as well as ties to high cholesterol, diabetes, and dementia.
- Elder abuse is more likely when others are not checking on a senior.
- Financial scammers use a senior's loneliness to their advantage.
- Seniors still working or enrolled in daycare programs lose their ability to have that human connection.
- A study by the AARP Public Policy Institute, Stanford University and Harvard found that Medicare spends about \$6.7 million more on socially isolated seniors than it does on other seniors.

How We All Can Pitch in to Alleviate a Senior's Stress

Judi Lirman, a Woodland Hills, CA-based Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, offers the following suggestions for what seniors and their loved ones can do during this transitional time that will reduce stress and anxiety.

First, here are some simple, but caring measures family members, friends, and caregivers can take to help seniors during this health crisis:

- Create new routines to establish a sense of normalcy.
- Treat them with extra TLC; this is a scary time.
- Be present when calling or spending time with them online.
- Assure them that they a support system who will take care of their needs. For example: whom they can call to chat, contact their doctor or caregiver, reach a helpline, instructions on how to use the phone or internet, and how to access

Skype, Zoom, Face Time, etc. Prepare multiple copies of these notes in case they get misplaced.

- Answer their questions directly and clearly.
- Check in with them about how their physical and emotional health.
- Suggest activities to keep their mind off their physical isolation such as reading a book, taking a walk, calling someone to chat, doing laundry, exercising, anything safe that does the trick.
- Talk to them about how they have previously weathered storms in their lives and how they moved forward.

According to Lirman, it is just as important to give seniors the power to reduce panic and anxiety. Here are some tips:

- Talk down a fear. Example: *"No one will call me. Is that true? Ruthie called me two days ago. Ben seems to call every week. But I miss my grandkids. I keep getting pictures of them from my daughter-in-law, and they call me. I could call my friend Toby to talk. The young family down the block or my family calls to ask if I need anything. The truth is I am hearing from several people regularly, maybe too much. But I know I can always call or email them if I want. Maybe I don't have to worry about this."*
- Practice belly breathing, a relaxation technique. This helps calm the nerves.
 - Lie down or sit comfortably.
 - Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose for a count of 3 or 4 and fill your stomach with air like a balloon.
 - Breathe out through your mouth for a count of 5 or 6 and watch the "balloon" deflate. It's essential to take the extra few seconds to breathe out to avoid hyperventilating or lightheadedness.
 - If you can't belly breathe, sit or lie down and breathe without inflating your stomach, but with the same slowing rhythm.
- Contact someone they know and offer reassurance to them that this too shall pass.

Be aware that is a scary time for everyone. Let's make the extra effort to check on those who live alone, especially seniors. To keep our mind and body healthy, we all must maintain social contacts in whatever form they may be. Stay home and stay safe.

Sandy Rosenholz, Senior Resources CA, Inc., helps seniors and their families in the greater Los Angeles area find senior communities that will make their life healthier, happier and safer no matter what their age. Contact Sandy at (818) 359-2125 or email SR@SeniorResourcesCA.com.