

Often, the elderly handle the pandemic very well. Here's why.



By Ellyn A. Lem

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When storms knocked the power out in my mom's senior apartment building for the third time in 24 hours, I expected her to be in a panic — no air conditioning, stove or lights. Instead, her 84-year-old self sounded exuberant as she called from a friend's cellphone to let me know she was managing fine. There was a lot of laughing and chatter in the background as she gathered with acquaintances, pooling flashlights and candles like bold adventurers.

Stories abound of many older Americans handling the pandemic with the kind of resilience and aplomb my mother showed in the storm emergency. My father’s cultural calendar far exceeds my own with Zoom lectures ranging from the cast of the Netflix miniseries “Unorthodox” to human rights activist Natan Sharansky, which he views in between Silver Sneakers exercise classes also streamed in from various sites to the comfort of his living room.

Unlike teenagers and those in their 20s who have grown up with the immediate gratification of social media “likes,” those 65 and older are more seasoned at waiting and can tolerate patience in a way that is hard for many of the rest of us, who were done with this pandemic months ago.

That many individuals in their 60s and beyond are coping well in these uncertain times corroborates much of the research I did with that demographic for my book, “Gray Matters: Finding Meaning in the Stories of Later Life.”

The surveys with 25 open-ended questions on aging were distributed at social and residential facilities that cater to those 65 and older and shared electronically with survey participants’ friends and family members nationwide to capture a range of elders’ experiences. Of the over 200 people who completed the surveys, nearly every one described their “general mood most days” in very upbeat terms despite also acknowledging health concerns, care-taking responsibilities and some loneliness.

Research also has noted that the majority of people worldwide become happier as they age, perhaps because they accept inevitable changes

that occur over time and develop appreciation for the good that remains in their lives.

When Patrick Klaiber, a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia, and colleagues collected daily surveys from people ages 18 to 91 during the pandemic, they found that older generations reported handling the stress of covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, more effectively than those who are younger.

Other reports reveal similar data, including a study by the investment company Edward Jones and the think tank Age Wave looking at 9,000 people across five generations. The older participants in the study reported the highest percentages of coping “very well” with covid-19.

This disparity may be partly explained by seniors often having fewer work-family conflicts than those with younger children. But others recognize that living in one’s later years gives perspective that difficult times will pass eventually, and that there is experience to draw upon to help remain resilient during hardship and challenges.

My Uncle Lou, for example, who just turned 90, describes his surviving the Korean War at 22 to be a “defining moment” that taught him to be “thankful” to be alive; he still remembers his four brothers serving in World War II, including one who was taken as a prisoner of war. Lou has been spending time during the pandemic listening to music and working on his autobiography. He commented, “We are handling [the pandemic] with a positive attitude.”

To point out that many older people are weathering this pandemic is not to minimize the serious problems that are affecting them. More

than 48,000 nursing home residents have died of covid-19, and Blacks and other people of color have been disproportionately affected. Countless nursing homes still do not have sufficient testing and the personal protective equipment needed to guarantee the safety of employees and residents.

Isolation for those in senior-care facilities has been heightened during the pandemic as well with strict limits on visits with family members and overall fear of exposure to the virus leading to stringent self-policing by some residents who are afraid to come into contact with asymptomatic carriers.

But amid these worrisome trends, positive developments have emerged.

Quarantining during the pandemic has made people experience what many older adults go through every day, spending significant time at home without a set schedule providing structure to days and a certain tempo. With everyone having less social interaction outside of the house when quarantined, families spent more time using technology to connect with relatives.

For those seniors without available family members, organizations have developed innovative projects to expand older adults' social interaction. The nonprofit group TimeSlips initiated Milwaukee Tele-Stories, for example, pairing local artists with 10 "under-connected" elders for weekly conversation and creative engagement that will end with artists making a "legacy gift" for each.

TimeSlips founder and chief executive Anne Basting also started a "creative care" postcard project with care facilities that have requested personal, uplifting mail be sent to their residents. Basting says that

“FaceTime calls” can be great but a postcard can be a “little gasp of joy again and again. All day long.”

As we all sail into the unknown, there is some emerging data that being exposed to “age diversity” contributes to longevity. I think of that now more than ever when I arrive at the Y pool for water tai chi with an intergenerational group that ranges from 15 to 90. One of our movements is called “accepting with grace.” Many older people there and elsewhere already have mastered this timeless ideal.

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