



Gerontologists tell us that feeling we make a difference in the world provides a powerful healthy aging boost. A 2019 study of 7,000 older adults published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* showed that those who engaged in activities they consider worthwhile have more positive health outcomes. Study author Prof. Andrew Steptoe of University College London (UCL) said that the effects include better personal relationships, healthier lifestyles, better mental and physical health, and higher rates of exercise and socialization. “Higher ratings were also associated with favorable biomarkers, such as faster gait speed, stronger handgrip, higher-density lipoprotein cholesterol, higher vitamin D

concentrations, less obesity, and lower plasma C-reactive protein and lower white blood cell counts,” the study authors noted. “Compared with people who reported higher worthwhile ratings, people with low ratings were twice as likely to develop depressive symptoms over this period, and 30% more likely to develop chronic pain.”

Previous studies also have linked a purposeful to brain health, a stronger heart, better sleep, a longer life, and greater independence during our later years.

The UCL study participants reported getting a sense of meaning in their lives from doing things with and for their families, from accomplishments in their work or hobbies, from spending time in nature, even from following a favorite sports team. Of course, since that study was published, a lot has changed for older adults. Many outlets for meaningful activity are not available at this time. Social distancing remains vital for protecting older adults from COVID-19, even as the vaccine is being distributed.

Even before the pandemic began, our older years could present challenges. Most older adults retire from their jobs. Children grow up and often move away. Disabilities can reduce the ability to take part in meaningful activities. To make up for these changes, some older adults take a part-time job after retirement. Others become active in committees and clubs in their senior living community. Many volunteer in schools or for charitable organizations.

Yet with so many of these activities off-limits, it’s no wonder that many older adults report feeling depressed, lonely, and with deflated self-esteem. But ever-resourceful, many are finding alternative activities—new ones, or old favorites adapted for the times. If you or an older loved one are looking for engaging activities, here are some ideas:

Volunteer...at a distance. Older volunteers can share their talents and knowledge online, or if public health officials and doctors say it’s safe, out of the home while taking precautions. If you are tech-savvy, be sure to help older friends and relatives learn the ropes of video conferencing and other technologies that have come to the forefront so much since the quarantine began.

Clubs and groups have moved online, too. There are online book groups, craft clubs, board game teams, and committee meetings. Many faith communities are convening virtually. Even choirs and other performing arts associations are getting together in this way.

Time to write your memoir. Putting our life story on paper is a powerful tool for creating a sense of who we are—and a treasure for the next generation. Maybe you finally have enough time for that. Or help a loved one write about their reminiscences, even from afar.

Connect the generations. Schedule regular phone calls or video chats with older friends who live alone or in a senior living community. And don't forget the kids! With the school situation today, there's a need for online tutors and mentors. Read to the grandchildren, or just "hang out" on a video chat. (The parents will probably be quite grateful for the break!)

Go back to (virtual) school. Learning something new enhances our sense of meaning. If there is a silver lining to this period of social distancing, it's that many universities, libraries, senior centers, arts organizations other organizations now offer virtual classes and programs. Some colleges also are offering online degree completion programs.

Make charitable contributions. If you can afford to do so, donate to worthy organizations that can use your financial help. Give to beloved businesses that are trying to stay afloat, to cultural organizations whose revenue has been so curtailed by social distancing, or to groups that help people who are affected by the pandemic. (Note: Be sure to do your homework before donating money. Sad to say, some con artists are out there trying to siphon off this money into their own pockets.)

Say thank you. People are finding ways to show their appreciation for essential workers and others who are doing so much these days. Whether it's a note for the mailman, banging pots on the front steps to cheer on healthcare workers or a big online celebration of the local hospital, showing gratitude is good for the recipient—and for ourselves.