

# Apart, not alone: Why connection matters in later life



## What does social connection mean?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing is important for your physical health. However, social connection is just as important for your well-being.

There are three important parts to social connection:



how often and who you connect with



the support you get from your connections (e.g., for physical or emotional support or for learning new information)



how you feel about our connections (e.g., feeling lonely or a sense of belonging).

Social connection is when you connect with other people, either in person or from afar. For example, you can connect with friends, family, neighbours, pen pals or even grocery store workers. You can also support your well-being with other types of connection, such as connecting with animals, with nature or through your faith.

## Why do meaningful connections in later life matter?

Meaningful connections are important for your physical health, mental health and quality of life.

What connections are meaningful to you might be different from connections that are meaningful to your friends or family. Consider speaking with your healthcare provider about what this means to you. Together, you can build a plan for making meaningful connections.

## Other ways to find connection

If you are feeling lonely or isolated, there are many ways to support your mental health. Below are a few suggestions on how you can change your thinking, feeling and doing.



### **Thinking: Changing your perspective**

- **Ask yourself:** “How can I view the situation from a different perspective?” or “How would someone I think highly of view this situation?”
- **Practice mindfulness:** Mindfulness is when you approach your thoughts and emotions, rather than avoid them. You then accept those thoughts without judgement. Ask your healthcare provider about simple mindfulness practices you can try from home. For three simple steps you can take in mindfulness, visit: [positivepsychology.com/wp-content/uploads/3-Step-Mindfulness-Worksheet.pdf](https://positivepsychology.com/wp-content/uploads/3-Step-Mindfulness-Worksheet.pdf)
- **Write down your thoughts:** List reasons that support the thought and reasons that challenge that thought. For example, a reason to challenge the thought “no one cares about me” could be “friends and family are protecting my health by not visiting”.



### **Feeling: Changing your body sensations**

- **Soothe all five senses:** Listen to music, smell freshly baked cookies, pet your dog/cat, look at artwork, taste your favourite food.
- **Practice calming activities:** Try deep breathing exercises, muscle relaxation or imagining relaxing images. For detailed guidance, visit: [www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health\\_Information/Health\\_Topics/Documents/Relaxation\\_Techniques\\_to\\_Relieve\\_Stress.pdf](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Relaxation_Techniques_to_Relieve_Stress.pdf)  
Ask your health provider about other exercises you can try from home.

- **Change your temperature:** Warm up by taking a bath or sipping warm tea. Cool down by splashing cold water on your face or holding an ice cube.



### **Doing: Connecting with others in new ways**



- **Focus on helping others:** Volunteer remotely (e.g., write letters to someone living in a nursing home) or take care of a neighbour's pet or plants.
- **Connect with people in safe ways:** Call loved ones, look at photographs or call friendly lines for support. **A Friendly Voice** (1-855-892-9992) is a phone line for older adults in Ontario to hear a friendly voice. **ConnexOntario** (1-866-531-2600) is a free phone line to learn about mental health services in Ontario.
- **Remind yourself of a shared humanity:** Connect with nature (e.g., watching birds or looking at flowers), make art or listen to music.

While you may be apart from loved ones, you are not alone. These are just a few of the steps you can take to challenge your thoughts and feeling and make meaningful connections. Talk to your healthcare provide about how you can build a plan to cope with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*This handout is based on Van Orden et al.'s (2020) article "Strategies to Promote Social Connections among Older Adults during 'Social Distancing' Restrictions."*