

Strategies for social connection among isolated older adults



What you need to know

- The authors present a model for social connectedness that focuses on how older adults can change their thinking, feeling and connections to reduce their distress during periods of isolation.
- Service providers and older adults can build a “Connections Plan” to develop coping strategies for preventing or managing social isolation during periods of isolation.
- Printable handouts and a worksheet are included to support implementation.

Social connections are important for older adults’ physical health, mental health and overall quality of life. Yet, during the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults are more likely to experience social isolation. To address the loneliness and stress of social isolation, the [HOPE Lab](#) (Helping Older People Engage) created a cognitive-behavioral model and tools to promote social connections in later life. In the special issues article, “Strategies to Promote Social Connections Among Older Adults During ‘Social Distancing’ Restrictions,” the authors provide an overview of the model as well as effective strategies and tools, such as a “Connections Plan,” that service providers can immediately apply to their work with older adults.

A cognitive-behavioural model of social connectedness

For many older adults, the idea of being intentional about social connection is an unfamiliar concept, and there are many emotional barriers to changing behaviours. Service providers can use the cognitive-behavioural model of social connectedness to shift the way older adults think about social connection.

Providers can use the model to support older adults in recognizing that the loneliness and stress they experience in social isolation is due to both objective circumstances (e.g., disability, few social ties, barriers to socializing/physical distancing measures) and subjective perceptions (e.g, thinking they are always alone, feeling useless). The authors present three interdependent components in a cognitive-behavioural model of social connectedness:

- thinking (self-talk): changing your perspective
- feeling (in your body): changing your body sensations
- doing (actions): changing the ways you connect.

Supporting older adults to view social connection from this perspective can give them a sense of control over the situation and help tailored strategies to reduce their distress.

What is a “Connections Plan”?

A “Connections Plan” is a plan that service providers and older adults can build together—even over the phone. It uses the cognitive-behavioural model to develop coping strategies for preventing or managing social isolation during periods of isolation.



The plan is flexible. It can be used by many professionals who work with older adults and adapted for different community and health settings. For example, it can be used by care managers who work in Senior Active Living Centres or occupational therapists in nursing homes.

Service providers supporting older adults on the phone can mail or email support materials before connecting or share their screen when videoconferencing.

The following support materials can be used as part of a “Connections Plan”:

- **Apart, not alone: Why connection matters in later life (PDF)**

This handout can be widely distributed to older adults. It introduces the concept of social connections and provides strategies for making connections that are based on the cognitive-behavioural model (ways to change ones thinking, feeling and doing).

- **Matching thoughts to emotions exercise (PDF)**

This exercise is a helpful way to discuss the relationship between thoughts and feelings with older adults. It shows how different interpretations of being alone during social distancing restrictions can lead to different thoughts and emotional reactions.

- **A “Connections Plan” template (PDF)**

Considerations for using a “Connections Plan”

A “Connections Plan” is a simple and useful tool for service providers to provide support in person or remotely. Below are a number of practical considerations for using a “Connections Plan.”

Understanding barriers to connection

- Ask open-ended questions. The [Questionnaire for Assessing the Impact of the COVID -19 Pandemic on Older Adults](#) provides questions to help understand older adults’ barriers to social connection.
- Use strengths-based language, which focuses more on the skills and support the person has rather than words that are interpreted as problems. For example, rather than using words like “loneliness,” ask about older adults’ relationships.
- Don’t assume which connections are important to older adults.
- Recognize that how older adults engage with others is often shaped by their upbringing and culture.
- Give older adults time to answer these questions as it may be new to them.
- Identify what might make older adults hesitant to change. For example, ask, “When you think about [calling X hotline] what emotions do you feel?”

Explaining the cognitive-behavioural model

- Use external examples (refer to the *Matching thoughts to emotions exercise* handout) to help explain how perceptions impact stress and loneliness. This allow older adults to focus on the process rather than the fixating on the content of their thoughts.
- Share examples to challenge thoughts, feelings and actions (refer to the *Apart, not alone: Why connection matters in later life* handout).



Improving implementation of a “Connections Plan”

- Use leading questions and prompts to help older adults identify potential strategies themselves instead of offering advice.
- Involve family members in the process when possible and share with them the principles of the cognitive-behavioral model.

During a time of uncertainty and physical distancing, it is essential to use evidence-informed practices to promote social connection in later life. A “Connections Plan” brings together techniques that service providers already use in a straight-forward way so that it can be immediately used to support isolated older adults.

About the authors

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