



Social Distancing Versus Social Isolation:

How to Stay Healthy
and Connected at
Arm's Length



Even before a novel virus emerged in late 2019, researchers have long been studying [the effects of isolation on older people](#).

Now, as the world responds with unprecedented speed to the threat of Covid-19, the urgency of helping everybody stay in touch is an urgent priority – in particular for vulnerable seniors and the newly-telecommuting, homeschooling, [stressed sandwich generation](#), who coordinates their care (now from a distance).

Physical social distancing is a critical precaution to [‘flatten the curve’](#). And yet, we must also be aware of the potential for serious psychological and emotional consequences of physical isolation, and take proactive steps to prevent and mitigate that toll.



Everyone needs different amounts of social connection to avoid loneliness

We know [social isolation](#) and loneliness are two different things. Loneliness is a feeling of deprivation; we are social animals, and we need each other. At the same time, individual needs for social connection vary, just as our needs for sleep.

Had we all been asked to retreat to our homes for the safety of others in the 1990s or even in 2006, we would have been able to rise to the challenge, but with much greater consequences to our mental and emotional health. Even as The New York Times profiled the difficulties older people are facing in [‘I’m Really Isolated Now’: When Elders Have to Fight Coronavirus Alone](#), there are blessings to count: Covid-19 emerged at a time in human history when we have never been better equipped to handle the challenge of isolation through technology.

With cell phones, tablets, smart televisions, broadband internet, and free or affordable communication platforms, people have more ways to remain in touch today than at any point in our past.

“If you haven’t yet dipped your toe into video chat technology, now is the time to take a few deep breaths, set aside trepidation, and get started”

Make a plan to prevent loneliness during social distancing and preventive isolation

The United States is still making its earliest efforts to establish policies, practices, and protocols to keep everyone as safe as possible during this period. As we continue to learn more about the best medical and scientific evidence, recommendations and situations may continue to change. Still, families and individuals can help proactively stave off emotional and psychological pressures that can result from too much alone time.

1. Make a plan for “the new normal.”

Who are the friends, neighbors and relatives you would normally “go out with” or “have over” under “normal circumstances?”

Reach out to them via text, email, or phone calls at regular intervals. See how they’re doing. Find out if they have a plan to stay in touch with people. Find out what technology everyone has in common, then organize virtual get-togethers.

Identify regular times and days to check in with each other and stick to them – either with a quick text, a call, or a video chat. Most importantly: Don’t fret if you haven’t showered, done your makeup, or combed your hair when a video call arrives. Your loved ones want to see your face and hear your voice, and connection is the best medicine.

Get creative. What “normal” social activities can you do online? Pictionary? Charades?

Make planning the next call the fun part of each get-together. Having something to look forward to is important in uncertain, stressful times, and the promise of a nightly or weekly face-to-face long-distance



game of chess or checkers can become a lifeline for someone who’s been unable to see people in the “real world.”

2. Explore video chat options.

If you haven’t yet dipped your toe into video chat technology, now is the time to take a few deep breaths, set aside trepidation, and get started. What’s the worst thing that could happen?

Each video chat technology requires a slightly different setup, but are compatible with most smartphones, laptops, and tablets (with the exception of FaceTime).

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The most popular platforms have pages of help and troubleshooting. And there’s always technical support to assist Mom setting it up if she’s having a bit of trouble at the beginning.

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Step-By-Step Directions

Google Hangouts:

The 900-pound gorilla of the tech world has been facilitating Gen Z’s group homework for many years; now with everyone at home together, the kids can help Mom, Dad, and Grandma get up to speed on [the tool many schools use for chats in the classroom](#).

Zoom:

The largest teleconferencing app/platform on Earth just waived its free plan’s 40-minute time limit for schools as part of its response to Covid-19, and for the rest of us, plans are affordable. Up to [100 people can join one “room” for a virtual “meeting”](#) that lasts as long as 24 hours in the most affordable (\$14.99/month) plan, and the Zoom app works from desktops, phones, and tablets – both PC and Mac.



FaceTime (Apple iOS only):

If you and your circle are mostly Apple fans and iPhone/iPad users, you already have the technology to [connect face-to-face with multiple people](#) at your fingertips.