



Connecting with loved ones in long-term care facilities during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread quickly around the globe. The virus is starting to spread into First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities across Canada. Responding to the pandemic has partly involved separating family members. This includes separating family from their kin living in long-term care facilities. Elderly people are very vulnerable to the potentially fatal problems of COVID-19. As a result, long-term care facilities have “no visitor” policies. These policies keep residents and care providers safe. Sometimes, for instance when a loved one is dying, an exception to the policy might be made. These exceptions are rare, they must be preapproved, and strict rules are generally in place to reduce transmitting COVID-19 to residents.

Visiting your loved ones in person may not be possible. Having an emotional connection with your elders and family is very important to their health and well-being. Connections are important for your health too. Emotional engagement and social activity helps keep seniors strong. It reassures them in this time of chaos. Connections can reduce feelings of loneliness, depression or boredom. Lack of human contact is harmful for residents in long-term care who have mental health conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease or dementia.¹ Maintaining social connection can help bring a sense of normality and familiarity to your elderly relatives and can ground them in the present. Social and family connection can also stimulate the brain and help slow symptoms of deteriorating memory.²

Just because you can’t see your loved one in person and give them a hug, there are still lots of ways for you to stay connected and show your family member how much you love them. Here are some ideas.

Have a window visit.

Some facilities encourage you to stay connected with loved ones through visits outside the window of their long-term care rooms. Others facilities discourage this practice because of concerns about physical distancing. Check with the care home to see what their policy is. If window visits are allowed, make sure you practice physical distancing. Keep at least two metres away from your loved one and others in the facility. Do not touch each other through open screens. You can hold up written messages to each other through closed windows. You can chat with each other with your smartphones. You can play a musical instrument or hand drum. You can sing your loved one’s favorite song or do a traditional dance outside their window.

Call them on the telephone.

Call your loved one regularly. Say hello and ask how they are doing. Talk to them about what you are doing and about your favourite memories with them. Talk about anything to brighten their day and lift their spirits. Even a few minutes on the phone can help reduce feelings of isolation, loneliness and anxiety.

Send them a drawing, card, letter, video or photograph.

Draw a picture of happy things or shared memories. Write a letter with uplifting messages. You can even have a dialogue using photographs. You can send cards, letters and photographs by regular mail or using a computer, through email. You can make a video of you playing an instrument, singing their favourite song, drumming or dancing. If your loved one does not have a laptop or tablet in their room, sometimes you can

¹ Dementia Care Central. (2019). Importance of maintaining social interactions & activities with Dementia or Alzheimer’s, <https://www.dementiacarecentral.com/caregiverinfo/handsoncare/socialization/>

² Ibid.

send your messages to a general care facility email. Your messages can either be printed out and delivered just like a letter or shared with your loved one on the facility's laptops or tablets. Staff may also be able to assist residents with writing responses to you.

Use technology to FaceTime.

Technology makes it possible to easily stay connected with loved ones across distance. You can stay connected through FaceTime, Skype or Zoom. These technologies allow you to share your stories and your emotions with your loved one. You can participate together in special events like birthdays. You can FaceTime, Skype or Zoom with your loved one at dinner and share a meal with them. You can share screens and play group trivia games. You can even have paint or drawing nights, do group meditation, or listen to music or watch a movie together.

Send a care package.

Familiar things can help reduce stress and improve mood. Send a care package with some of your loved one's favorite things, including snacks, lotions, trinkets, books or activities. Please check with the care facility first to determine if there are rules about bringing packages in from the outside. Ask the facility about the packaging material you want to use and learn about items that might not be allowed for health reasons.

Staff at long-term care facilities are helping residents stay connected in creative ways. Staff are implementing letter writing campaigns. They are promoting specially themed "Send a Photograph" campaigns (such as photos of everyone wearing a funny hat). Staff are using Facebook to allow residents to share messages with their family members and are organizing and scheduling window visits or virtual visits through Skype or FaceTime. Staff are also encouraging social activities that help residents stay connected to families, staff and each other. You can also keep in touch with care centre staff to get regular updates and make sure your loved one is safe.

This may be a difficult and stressful time for everyone. This time will eventually pass. Current visiting restrictions don't have to mean we are isolated from our loved ones. Be creative. Find the best ways for you and your loved ones to stay connected. Being connected can help reduce anxiety, loneliness and boredom. Being connected can support mental, emotional and social wellness for you, your entire family, and all your loved ones.

Resources

For families:

Home Instead Senior Care. (2020). Staying connected with a loved one in a facility while social distancing [live chat], <https://www.homeinstead.ca/covid-19/news/staying-connected>

The Dose. (2020). How can I help the senior in my life get through COVID-19? [Radio broadcast], <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/the-dose-how-we-can-help-seniors-get-through-covid-19-1.5519909>

Lafontaine, A. (2020). Covid-19 and Indigenous communities: Family conversations. Yellowhead Institute, <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/covid-19-brief.pdf>

For long-term care homes:

Resources for the health and well-being of residents, <https://clri-ltc.ca/covid19/#section2>

Indigenous Services Canada (2020). COVID-19 guidance for long term care facilities and nursing homes in Indigenous communities, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1586891818040/1586891878894>

For communities:

New Horizons for Seniors Program, a federal grants and contributions program that supports activities that foster the well-being of seniors, including activities that help seniors stay connected with their communities and families during COVID-19, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2020/04/new-horizons-for-seniors-program-projects-can-now-be-used-for-covid-19-support.html>

Mental health resources:

Hope for Wellness Helpline – Online Chat Counseling Service (available in English and French online, as well as Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut by phone upon request). Tel: 1-855-242-3310, online chat, <https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/>

Assembly of First Nations. (2020). Mental wellness and COVID-19 tips and considerations, https://www.afn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CoronaVirus_Factsheet_RED_ENG.pdf

Canadian Mental Health Association. (2020). COVID-19 and mental health resources, <https://cmha.ca/news/covid-19-and-mental-health>

Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2020). Resource hub: Mental health and wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic, <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/covid19>

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