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Guide to the Psychiatry of Old Age

Technology & Social Media during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Key Highlights:

- Social isolation can affect adults of all ages and should not be underestimated.
- Social media platforms and technology can provide adults with ways of practicing healthy distraction and opportunities to stay socially connected.
- Technological applications like Skype can facilitate face-to-face connections.
- For most people, loneliness and social isolation will be a short-lived, but for others it may become a long-term issue.

Introduction

Society has witnessed a phenomenal and unprecedented change to its daily life, since March 2020. COVID-19 striking at the heart of the world bringing business, education, lifestyle, tourism, and citizen behaviour to a standstill.

This change in various societal, business, education and individual ecosystems is likely to result in a myriad of consequences, some of which will be short-lived, while for others long-lasting. For many citizens,the new change in behaviour and identifying a new routine has and will continue to be difficult, this too is compounded with additional variables and activities such as home schooling, grocery shopping for vulnerable relatives, friends, and members of the community. For other citizens, categorized as keyworkers, from health practitioners, public sector (e.g. emergency service responders), stakeholders/charity workers who are answering the telephone to those citizens who are the most vulnerable in society; and are offering guidance and advice relating to their concerns will be witnessing at first hand the impact that this pandemic is having on our society.

The aim of this position piece is to discuss the impact of COVID-19 in relation to isolation, social connectedness, and how technology can facilitate positive distractions from the day-to-day routines for citizens during this pandemic.

Loneliness and social isolation have been at the forefront of policy concerns for several years, yet, COVID-19 is bringing the issue to the fore for people of all ages, as concerns are expressed about the negative impact of self-isolation. This is a particular concern for older adults and those with underlying health conditions who face the possibility of self-isolating for several months.

Loneliness is defined as an unpleasant negative feeling when there is a perceived disconnect between achieved and desired quality and/or quantity of social contacts (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). Social isolation, on the other hand, is an objective measure related to the absence of social contact (Wenger & Burholt, 2004). Previous work has shown that loneliness is often triggered around major life changes, e.g. having a baby, retirement, bereavement, onset of illness or disability, caring responsibilities. Changes to our way of life, as a result of the current pandemic, will also increase feelings of loneliness and social isolation for many.

Loneliness and social isolation have both been associated with poor health outcomes; recent work by Santini and colleagues (Santini, Jose, Cornwell, Koyanagi, Nielsen, & Hinrichsen, 2020) has shown that social disconnectedness puts older adults at risk of depression and anxiety. Previous work has also highlighted an association between loneliness and social isolation and an increased risk of cardiovascular, autoimmune, neurocognitive, and mental health problems (Hawkley, Thisted, Masi & Cacioppo, 2010; Armitage & Nellums, 2020). Research on coping mechanisms for managing loneliness and social isolation has identified several strategies, including interacting with others and solitary activities (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008). One strategy often utilized by lonely adults is distraction, this be through solitary activities, such as gardening, reading or through the use of technology.

Benefits of technology

We have seen a growth in contemporary scholarly evidence positing the benefits of technology in a bid to reduce loneliness and social isolation (Cotton, Anderson, & McCullough, 2013). Furthermore, we have started to increase the use of technology and associated platforms as a way of maintaining and continuing social

connectedness with loved ones and friends who may live in different geographic locations – either in the same region, across country or internationally (Marston, Genoe, Freeman, Kulczycki, & Musselwhite, 2019). However, there are still ongoing issues surrounding technology use by older adults, which include the lack of technical competence, mental models, and financial implications. While platforms such as Skype, Facetime and Zoom, offer citizens the opportunity to engage with each other face-to-face, and maintain a sense of familial relationship as noted by Marston and colleagues who ascertained for some participants in the Technology In Later Life (TILL) study, used Skype or Facetime regularly to maintain such relationships (Marston, Genoe, Freeman, Kulczycki, & Musselwhite, 2019). While it does not replace the physical contact of a hug, holding hands, or a kiss, when physical location or a pandemic is the barrier, such platforms can offer relief and a sense of connectedness.

One Twitter profile (@bertie_lakeland) posts the adventures of a Lakeland terrier who lives with his owners near Oxford, UK. Bertie the Lakeland terrier has over 20,000 followers, and throughout the day, his owners post videos, and photographs of his adventures, which include going for walks through fields, engaging with his owners in their back yards, and offering public service announcements (Marston, Musselwhite, & Hadley, 2020). This profile like others engage with the followers who comment on their postings, and for some, their contact with this profile or others may offer some light relief to one's life. The tweets and comments on this profile are friendly, a little cheeky sometimes, as well as fun and engaging, illustrating not only the life of a terrier, but also different environments, such as indoor and outdoor space (e.g. fields, back yard, living room/space, etc.).

Summary

This piece is just one example of how technology can impact citizens' lives in a positive manner and offer alternative activities for social disconnectedness and distraction especially for citizens who may be struggling with the realities of daily living during the COVID-19 pandemic. At present, there has been no direct research conducted in association with this particular Twitter profile or similar profiles. However, what is clear from this and the image is Bertie the Lakeland terrier is popular having received over 1,000 'likes' on a particular image, in addition to comments and retweets. These fun and pleasant distractions offer a light relief to citizens who are self-isolating or to the keyworkers fighting on the frontline.

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Acknowledgements

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