

# Loneliness Under Lockdown: Caring for Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19

Zier Zhou<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

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It is no surprise that struggles with mental health have become increasingly common over the past year.<sup>1</sup> Quarantine and social distancing aim to control the spread of COVID-19, but these public health measures also prevent people from freely interacting with each other, which can be detrimental to their psychosocial well-being.<sup>2</sup> This situation is considerably worse for those who lack established social networks and access to technological tools. Combined with the disrupted delivery of mental health services, loneliness has turned into a crisis of its own.<sup>2-4</sup>

## THE UPS AND DOWNS OF TECHNOLOGY

Unlike previous pandemics, living in the digital age of video calling and instant messaging means that communities do not have to be entirely isolated. Improving network connectivity and building computer literacy can reduce digital inequalities and allow more people to keep in touch.<sup>5</sup> Most students and professionals have transitioned from

in-person meetings to workdays at home with meetings on Zoom, which often expand accessibility by removing travel costs and reducing time investments.<sup>6, 7</sup> Tablets and smartphones further enable patients to connect with their loved ones and healthcare workers to enhance communication in clinical settings.<sup>6</sup>

However, virtual conferences are far from a perfect replacement for face-to-face conversations because that sense of closeness and authenticity is still missing.<sup>6</sup> In general, prolonged use of social networking sites is linked to unfavourable conditions including low self-esteem, depression, and internet addiction.<sup>8, 9</sup> Negative feelings such as fear and worry can easily spread and influence numerous online users. Moreover, there exists an “infodemic”, where the rapid distribution of misinformation about COVID-19 can lead to confusion and behaviours that harm one’s mental or physical health.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is essential to monitor and filter out false reports, promoting evidence-based facts instead.

Despite its flaws, social media presents people with an opportunity to maintain relationships and access entertainment while staying at home. The amount of activity and engagement on platforms like Facebook and Twitter has clearly surged since the start of this pandemic.<sup>5,7</sup> As long as individuals remain mindful of their usage, there is no time like the present to take advantage of technology to enhance existing social networks as well as reconnect with old friends and distant family members.<sup>3, 5</sup>

## REMOTE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Sufficient support can be difficult to obtain in the time of COVID-19 when mental health issues are on the rise and systems get overwhelmed.<sup>1, 4</sup> For example, counselling services including the Kids Help Phone have seen huge spikes in phone calls and text messages from youth across Canada.<sup>10</sup> Increased government funding and volunteer recruitment make a meaningful difference in addressing this health crisis.<sup>10</sup> By ensuring that there is always somebody willing to listen and offer support, those who reach out no longer need to be alone when dealing with stressful moments, from anxiety attacks and depressive episodes to thoughts or plans of suicide.

Virtual peer support groups like those offered by the Canadian Mental Health Association are another resource for anyone struggling with their mental well-being.<sup>4, 11</sup> These interactions give individuals the chance to share personal stories and bond over similar experiences, helping them gain insight into potential coping strategies and promote healthcare-seeking behaviours.<sup>12</sup> Patients with serious mental illness have also reported stronger feelings of hope and group belonging from joining these online communities.<sup>12</sup>

## CONNECTING THE YOUNG AND ELDERLY

It has been suggested that the term “social distancing” may be misleading and should be changed to “spatial distancing”, which more accurately describes the act of maintaining physical distance from others.<sup>13</sup> However, strict adherence to this rule can result in the separation of important social networks, interfering with one’s mental health.<sup>4, 13</sup> When the pandemic hit, most people were unprepared to experience sudden disconnection from their communities and forced to adapt quickly. For the young

and elderly, living through these circumstances has been especially confusing and disruptive.<sup>2, 14</sup>

Apart from promoting learning and education, schools support younger students by providing services, structure, and socialization, which is a key aspect of growing up and developing relationships.<sup>15</sup> Health experts in pediatrics, infectious disease, and mental health have recommended that Ontario schools remain open with prevention and control strategies in place to prioritize their developmental health.<sup>16</sup> Although it is too early to understand the long-term impacts of COVID-19, feelings of anger and confusion along with symptoms of post-traumatic stress are known to be common among children during and after quarantine.<sup>15</sup>

Technical and cognitive challenges, in addition to impaired hearing and vision, can make it difficult for seniors to take advantage of modern technology.<sup>14</sup> Many of them do not consider cell phones and similar devices as convenient for communicating with others.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, nursing home residents who rely on caregivers for help with everyday tasks cannot access the internet as easily as the rest of the population. Such concerns may reflect the necessity of taking a harm reduction approach, where relatively safe in-person activities continue for the elderly in order to avoid the greater risks of isolation and maintain their psychological well-being.<sup>2, 13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ongoing pandemic limits access to various social activities, creating significant challenges to mental health. However, health goes beyond avoiding COVID-19. Finding ways to stay connected, either remotely through technology or following physical distancing guidelines, is equally important. In times of uncertainty, social networks enable community members to seek support, overcoming isolation and other hardships. For some, spending time apart may lead them to the realization that relationships, whether with close friends or casual acquaintances, are not to be taken for granted. And if there is a silver lining to be found amidst this crisis, then hopefully it inspires people to value and appreciate their social connections, more than ever before.

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