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Division of
Clinical Psychology
Faculty of the Psychology
of Older People

GUIDANCE

Supporting older people and people living with dementia during self-isolation

A COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Covid-19 and finding the strength to cope: We keep being told that these are unprecedented times and it is true that as humans we have never encountered this new Corona virus (Covid-19). However, as individuals we have encountered adversities before and as a species we have evolved to be able to deal with all sorts of threats. So we have within us the skills that we need to get through. But what can be tricky is that when we are faced with overwhelming threat, we have natural responses such as fear, anger or feeling too overwhelmed to do anything. These responses can be really helpful in dealing with short term problems, but if we live with those kinds of feelings ruling the show for long, they have damaging effects on our mental health and even our immunity.

SO WHAT CAN WE DO INSTEAD?

Compassion focused therapy brings our attention to the strength we gain when we focus on the fact that 'we're all in the same boat'. And now really is a time in our lives, like no previous time, when we realise that across the globe we are sharing in this challenging period.

To come through this well, we need to have the courage to turn our attention to the challenges and difficulties we are facing... and then do something about them. And there are small things that we can do.

As well as the bad news, there are suddenly good news stories on the radio and television: People sharing their ideas about how we can be flexible, how we can hold in mind people that normally are not thought about, how we can pool our resources and skills and work together as communities.

We are having to tolerate that we may not be able have everything that we want, but we may be able to survive with what we need... especially if we adopt a sharing *lagom* philosophy. What really matters is coming into clearer focus.

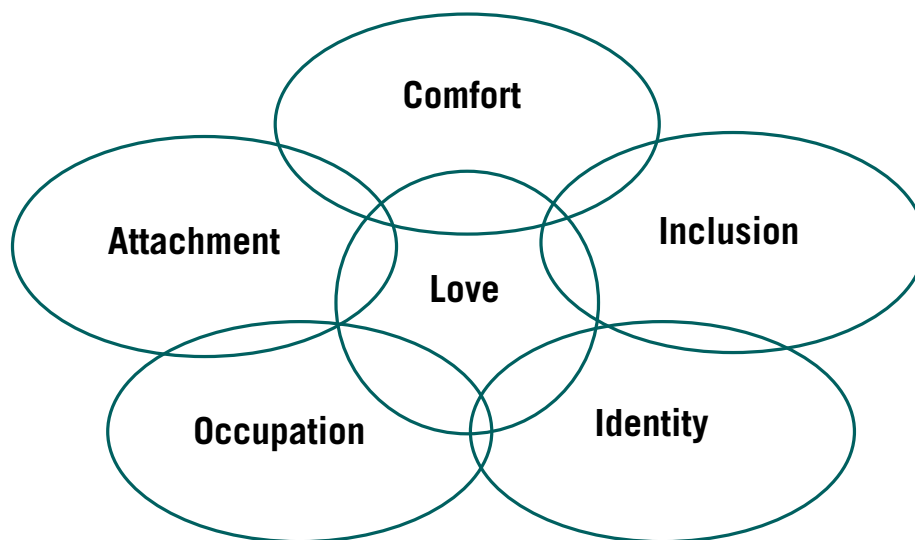
GUIDANCE

And after many years of being used to helping others, we may be starting to realise that we need to open our hearts to receiving offers of help and kindness. Feeling gratitude for all the ways that people have already changed their lives for the greater good, like the children putting their schooling on hold to try to protect their elders.

There is no certainty about what tomorrow will bring but today we can start to give more air to our inner light, kindle our inner fire of courage to face this challenge with kindness for ourselves, empathy for others and a graceful calmness for the world around us.

MEETING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA DURING SOCIAL-ISOLATION

Tom Kitwood (1997) defined the psychological needs of people living with dementia as; love, comfort, attachment, occupation, inclusion and identity. These are commonly displayed as the 'Kitwood Flower'.



In times of challenge, such as those we are currently facing, it is even more important that we think about the most effective ways to help people living with dementia to meet their psychological needs and promote wellbeing.

LOVE

Everybody needs love and acceptance. We can probably all think of times when we feel love whether this is loving a person, enjoying an activity, having a favourite meal or self-love. Having to self-isolate may make it harder for us to do the things that make us feel love or loved, as we can't see the people we usually see or access activities we usually engage in. You could think about making a photo album with pictures of all the people you care about so you can look at them whenever you want to. How about adding in stories of times you have enjoyed together? Make sure you look after yourself and maybe spoil yourself a bit; get your favourite food in; listen to your favourite music; sit in the garden and enjoy nature or watch a film you really enjoy.

COMFORT

We all need our basic needs met including our emotional need to not feel anxious. It is natural that with all the news about the Covid-19 virus and feelings of uncertainty we might feel more anxious than usual. There are lots of ways we can control our anxiety. It might be useful to limit the amount of time we spend watching the news – there are lots of confusing messages out there that can increase anxiety. Some people find that practicing mindfulness, or trying relaxation techniques help with anxiety. A lot of people now enjoy mindfulness colouring to give them something to focus on rather than thinking of what is going on in the world that we can't control!

ATTACHMENT

Attachment describes the connections we have in life. These attachments, or connections, are important in helping us feel safe and secure. Being in self-isolation is likely to mean we can't physically spend time with the people who make us feel safe. It might feel hard to be separated from these people but there are still ways to stay in touch. The telephone is a great way to stay in contact with people. It might be helpful to keep a list of telephone numbers for friends and family by the phones so you can find them easily. If you use a tablet, computer or smart phone you might consider video messaging. If you have never done this before there are some excellent guides produced specifically for people living with dementia. When people aren't around consider other things that make us feel secure like a pet or a favourite piece of clothing.

OCCUPATION

It is vital for our wellbeing that whilst we are self-isolating we still find meaningful and enjoyable thing to do. This might feel challenging at first but look around you and think of all the opportunities that are available to you. Routine and structure in your day are likely to help in maintaining activity during this time. If you have a garden try to get some fresh air each day. This is a great time to do all the tidying and sorting in the house that you have always meant to do. Dig out those jigsaw puzzles from the back of the cupboard or maybe listen to a play on the radio or an audiobook. It will be important to keep ourselves fit and well and so think about doing some exercise every day as well.

INCLUSION

Many people living with dementia get a lot of support from linking up with other people in a similar situation. It helps our wellbeing to feel that we are a part of something. At the current time many social groups will have stopped but maybe you could find other ways to stay connected. Think about writing a letter to a friend or family member. Some services are still offering groups by videoconferencing so you might be able to join one of these. The dementia engagement and empowerment project run the [dementia diaries](#) scheme where people living with dementia leave stories about their experiences. It might help to hear how others are doing at this time.

IDENTITY

A sense of identity helps us define and remember who we are as a person. The way other people treat us reinforces our beliefs about ourselves. During the time we are isolated it will be important to remind ourselves of all the things that are important to us. That might be by having things that are important to us, around us, such as a picture or photograph we like or playing music we have enjoyed. [Playlist for life](#) offer advice on putting together a list of your favourite music. Some people make a life story book where they put all the things that are important to them in one place.

Whatever happens do not be afraid to ask for help. There is lots of support out there. You could contact your local services or the following organisations might be able to help:

Alzheimer's Society – 0333 150 3456 (or if you speak Welsh – 03300 947 400)

Age UK – 0800 678 1602

The Silver Line – 0800 470 80 90

HOW CAN WE HELP PEOPLE WITH MEMORY PROBLEMS AND LIVING WITH A DEMENTIA TO UNDERSTAND, REMEMBER AND FOLLOW THE COVID-19 ADVICE?

Use posters and reminders in the house. Pictures and words are best. Put them on the doors, next to the sink and in places that are regularly passed. Point out the poster and make a clear statement 'We need to wash our hands'.

Keep communication as clear as possible and try to focus on what you need to do rather than why you must do it.

Tell your loved one that this is advice from a person they trust – maybe the GP, their children, the government so they understand this isn't your choice.

Use your digital devices to set reminders – 'It's time to wash your hands' 'It's time to phone a friend'.

Link washing hands with a song, music or story. Pay close attention to details such as how the water feels, the smell of the soap and memories linked to times when you wash hands (work, school, hospitals).

People with dementia, at all stages of difficulty, will pick up on anxiety and panic. Try to stay calm, matter of fact and upbeat.

Limit access to the news, radio and conversations about covid-19 and the risks. This heightens anxiety and is hard to explain.

Prioritise getting on well if you can, behaviours are easier to change if you keep the mood light and encourage.

Encourage family and friends to maintain regular phone and digital contact and ask them to explain that they are washing hands, keeping their distance and staying at home. We are all doing this together.

Keep busy in the house as much as possible and if you need a break to go out, use the garden or make a plan to sit and look out of the window. If you feel you really need to be outside, plan your walk carefully to maintain social distance.

Use your local community well. Explain to neighbours that your loved one may not remember the guidance and that they need to contact you if they are talking a walk outside. Remind everyone that this is not breaking rules it's simply not remembering.

If you can it might be an idea to identify two 'flu friends' who you can call on for extra help?

It is possible that your loved one will become suspicious about the advice and the isolation. Reassure them that they are safe at home and keep in mind a list of activities, songs, conversations and interests that you can use quickly to maintain their wellbeing.

Those with dementia can easily develop a delirium. Pay close attention to changes in levels of confusion or unusual behaviour. Seek medical advice if you think they are showing symptoms – NHS 111 or phone the GP/CPN.

Use the Herbert Protocol with your local police force. This lets them know all about your loved one and allows for quick action if they go missing. Find more information by calling your local Police station or calling Age UK.

Having a plan in place can help ease your worries if you are not able to care for those you look after at any point in the future. See [Carers UK](#) for practical advice on planning for emergencies.

[The National Activity Providers Association](#) are currently providing free access to their website for ideas and activities in the home.

[Dementia UK](#) also has good advice.

If you are someone living with dementia you may want to connect digitally through the [Dementia Engagement Empowerment Project](#). You may want to become a dementia diarists or to listen to what others people with a dementia are doing, learning and sharing.

Connect with others virtually maybe through [dementia diaries](#).

- 1 Focus on what you can control;**
- 2 It's helpful to develop routines;**
- 3 Look after yourself – ‘you cannot pour from an empty cup’;**
- 4 Find a way to be ‘out’ when you are in (contact friends and family – connect with other groups).**

Please do ask for help. Contact your local [Alzheimer's Society](#) or [Age UK](#) for a conversation.

Link with friends and **look after yourself**.

GUIDANCE FOR OLDER PEOPLE DURING SELF-ISOLATION

The government has responded to concerns over the spread of coronavirus by asking us all to strictly observe social distancing measures to limit the transmission of the virus. Those aged 70 or older are considered more vulnerable to severe illness from coronavirus and are asked to be particularly stringent in their application of these measures. Additionally, people with an underlying health condition have been asked to self-isolate for 12 weeks.

Self-isolation due to social distancing measures can result in increased distress due to e.g. lack of company, confined space, worries about infection, worries about money and strained family relationships. Confusion, anger, depression and anxiety are common responses in those who have had to endure quarantine for a number of weeks or months.

The effects of self-isolation can be worsened by longer duration, frustration, boredom, stigma, and inadequate supplies or information.

As an older adult, you may already live alone and/or rely on others for support. Self-isolation may make it more difficult for you get the support you need and may make you feel anxious or low. The suddenness of these changes in your life and to the roles you hold dear leaves little time to adjust.

The ideas that follow are provided to help you live as well as possible during self-isolation. They are consistent with current [NHS guidance](#) about how to improve mental wellbeing ('five ways to wellbeing') and share features of our guidance for those living with dementia.

CONNECT

Being 'connected' is linked to better wellbeing because it gives us a sense of belonging and self-worth, and is a source of emotional support.

Connecting with others in the same physical space is difficult during self-isolation. You may have supported your family up to now by looking after grandchildren and find that you can no longer do this. You may feel that your self-isolation is causing your family additional worry. You might be wondering what all the fuss is about and have had some disagreements with your loved ones about this.

Technology provides us with some solutions but it is not a substitute for actual contact. You may also take time to connect more with yourself, nature, nations, pets and/or spiritual needs:

- Switch off television: This helps limit your exposure to news, which may be making you feel anxious, and allows you to focus on the loved ones in your home.

Or

- Switch on the television! Watching a favoured television programme and reading a good novel have been found to reduce feelings of loneliness;
- Maintain social contacts over the telephone;
- Video conference: FaceTime, Skype and Zoom are platforms for seeing and speaking to loved ones at the same time. Although telephone is great, seeing facial expressions can help people feel less lonely. You may need some help from a loved one to put this in place. Additionally, help with this sort of technology can be found at [Fountain Digital](#);
- 'Create warmth'! The same parts of the brain are activated by heat, and by warmth from interpersonal contact. Creating opportunities for heat e.g. a hot drink and warm bath can mimic the effects of touch and increase our sense of connectedness;
- Spend time in nature;
- Revisit old photos/family films and share memories: Nostalgia has been found to enhance feelings of security and reduce loneliness;
- Email a different friend each day and make time to respond;
- Write a card or letter to a friend and ask a neighbour to post it for you;
- Discuss your worries with a friend or with your therapist/psychologist;
- Some more helpful ideas can be found at the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#).

BE ACTIVE

You may find during self-isolation that your confidence to try new things is reduced. You might believe that the way you feel is inevitable given your age and that there is very little you can do to change this. You may hold the view that you are powerless in the face of self-isolation and find that it impacts on every part of your day to day life as a result.

However, making conscious choices about our behaviour can boost our mood. As little as 10 minutes of exercise a day can make us feel better, both physically and emotionally. And activity that stimulates our brain can help us feel more alert. You may want to try the following during self-isolation:

- Exercise: There are lots of free exercise programmes/sessions available on the internet or on apps on your smartphone. You may want to ask for assistance to access these. You could try yoga, tai chi or other martial art practice, or increase your movements from your armchair. Other activities with mood-boosting effects include housework, gardening, using the stairs if it's safe to do so, dancing round the house and safely going for a walk.
- There are lots of ways you can stimulate your mind during self-isolation. Jigsaws, puzzle books or games, reading, colouring books for adults, painting or drawing, singing along to your favourite song, playing a musical instrument, sorting out your finances, cooking or baking and craft activities.

NOTICE

We tend to spend a lot of time dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This can be tiring, and not very helpful. Instead, 'savouring the moment', often referred to as 'mindfulness', has been found to enhance wellbeing:

- Breathing or meditation exercises: You can find lots of free exercises on the internet or through apps on your smart phone e.g. apps like Calm and Headspace. Ask someone if they can provide you with some if you have difficulties accessing the internet.
- Self-care is important during self-isolation and provides a great opportunity for mindfulness: Shower or bath frequently and take time to notice the sounds, smells and sensation of the water on your skin; do hair and nails; use hand cream or body lotion to maintain suppleness and notice how it feels.
- Mindful eating: Lay the table or tray for your meal and focus on the sight, smell and taste of your food.
- Reflect using music, prayer, the outdoors, silence; take a few moments to be thankful, notice and appreciate beautiful things around you.

LEARN

Learning new skills can help lift your mood, boost your self-esteem and give a sense of purpose. Setting yourself goals can help you see even greater benefits. It is also helpful to have good information about the reason for your social isolation:

- Get advice from NHS and read public health guidance to gain facts and dispel fear;
- Research online something that you have always wanted to know more about;
- Learn new words/look up definitions in the dictionary;

- Create a book club with friends/loved ones and discuss books over the phone or video conferencing;
- Challenge yourself to complete new puzzles, crosswords etc.;
- Learn to play a musical instrument;
- Learn a new language.

GIVE

Giving has been linked with a sense of reward, purpose and self-worth. Those who give to others are more likely to rate themselves as happy. You might feel it is hard to give to others during self-isolation. However even giving a smile, encouragement, your time, a wish/prayer, thanks, and other 'random acts of kindness' has the power to boost your mood.

These 'five ways' help us build on our strengths and increase our resilience. By promoting our self-esteem, sense of being valued, and a positive attitude, they can help us 'bounce back' from challenges we encounter. There are already many examples of compassion in our communities during this crisis. Leaflet drops with offers of help, businesses changing their procedures to meet the needs of the isolated, online communities sharing information to support home schooling, medical students setting up relief initiatives to provide child care/grocery drops for NHS staff, websites and apps making their content free for the duration of the crisis, churches taking a central role in supporting communities, milkmen delivering groceries to the housebound... to name but a few. As we all experience restrictions on our movement, freedom and choice. We have an opportunity to emerge from this crisis with fewer divides and greater empathy.



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