

# Communicating with Older Adults in a Health Crisis: Balancing Safety and Autonomy

## A 7-Part Series

*Health impacts of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic include biomedical, psychosocial, and behavioral factors, especially for older adults and their friends and families. In older adulthood, balancing safety and autonomy can be difficult, as can adjusting, and at times reversing, family roles. Some communication tips can help families and friends of older adults protect—and respect—their elders.*



As the name suggests, **“novel” coronavirus (COVID-19) is new**. The medical and scientific communities continue to learn about it daily, but some facts are already clear, and knowing them can help you keep yourself and your friends and family safe.

1. Infection is mostly acquired through your eyes, nose, and mouth. If you keep your hands away from your face and touch your eyes, nose, or mouth only after washing your hands thoroughly, your risk of infection will remain low.
2. Infection is mostly transmitted and acquired person to person. If you practice appropriate social distancing, your risks of giving someone the infection or getting the infection from someone both remain low.
3. As with many types of infection, COVID-19 more significantly harms those with compromised immune systems and underlying preexisting conditions, each of which tends to occur with advancing age. Thus, older adults are considered at highest risk.

Ageing depletes our physical reserves and reduces our capacity to recover from illness and maintain the body’s normal state of balance, called homeostasis. The rate at which this happens in a person’s life is different for each person, but the trend is universal.

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## PART 2: KNOW THE PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTS

Normal aging is generally accompanied by changes in physical function, psychological well-being, and social networks. Unfortunately, this can often include loss:

1. Loss of muscle strength, endurance, stamina, balance, and immunity
2. Loss of personal control, dignity, confidence, autonomy, or life purpose
3. Loss of spouses, friends, and family members, or profound changes to lifelong roles within these important relationships

### Each older person is different...

Older adults vary in their ability to adjust to loss and change. When helping older family and friends adapt, remember that each person is unique. One person might be remarkably resilient and able to cope with one kind of loss but less able to compensate for other changes. The adjustments your friend or family member needs to make may seem simple and straightforward, but to a person looking at a

profoundly altered life course, the stakes can in fact be quite high.

### ...but most have one thing in common

Regardless of age, health status, or adaptability to change, most older people **do** want to feel independent and useful, and **do not** want to feel dependent and useless. A study recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that among nearly 7,000 older Americans followed between 1992 and 2006, those who perceived less purpose in life were more than twice as likely to die. Helping older adults adapt to loss and change often means finding ways for them to give, not just receive.

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## PART 3: EXPRESS YOUR EMOTIONS

To help you discuss your concerns about the pandemic with older friends and family members, first ground yourself in a deep and accurate understanding of the medical facts and psychosocial realities they and you are confronting, discussed in part 1 and part 2 of this series.

It is safe to be honest about what you're feeling; in fact, it helps. This includes negative feelings toward loved ones (fear, anger, frustration, and helplessness) as well as positive feelings for them (love, compassion, and gratitude). Communicate what you feel, and, above all, directly express your desire to balance respecting their autonomy and dignity with helping to protect and ensure their safety. The more specific you are, the better. All parties are emotionally vulnerable at this time. When worried about specific behaviors, open discussion of feelings they create will likely be more palatable than criticizing or attempting to control them.

**DON'T:** "You shouldn't go to the supermarket; you'll get sick."

**DO:** "When you go out to places with lots of people, I feel quite worried. What about delivery? I could help you order online. Or if you're okay with it, maybe I could go for you? These options would really make it easier for me not to worry as much about you."

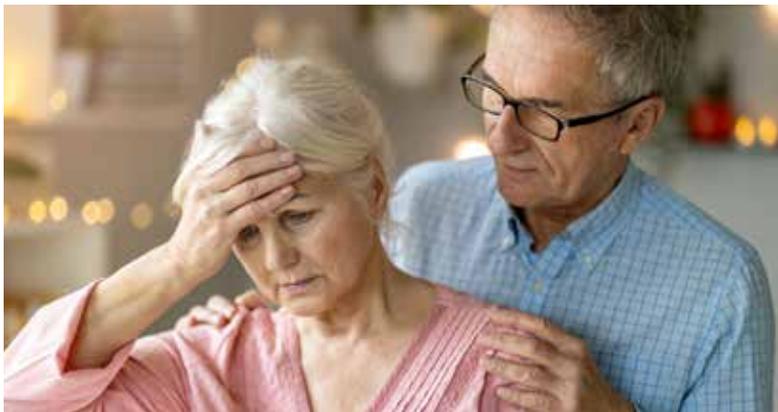
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## PART 4: ADDRESS PERCEIVED BURDEN

To help you discuss your concerns about the pandemic with older friends and family members, first ground yourself in a deep and accurate understanding of the medical facts and psychosocial realities they and you are confronting, discussed in part 1 and part 2 of this series.

Often, older adults do not want to feel they are burdening their younger loved ones, even if their loved ones do not feel burdened. Arguments often ensue with each party trying to convince the other not to worry, and frequently they end in stalemates. Being honest about how you feel can help you avoid getting into an energy-depleting standoff when you detect your older family members are trying not to bother you. It's rewarding to everyone if, when they do allow

you to provide them help and support, you express your gratitude, relief, and love for them.

**DON'T:** "Don't be ridiculous; you shouldn't be doing this yourself. I can do it."

**DO:** "Can I help? I don't want to get in the way, but it would make me feel a lot better."

**DO:** "Great! It really feels good when you let me help out, especially during these uncertain times. You've helped me plenty."

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## PART 5: MAKE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

To help you discuss your concerns about the pandemic with older friends and family members, first ground yourself in a deep and accurate understanding of the medical facts and psychosocial realities they and you are confronting, discussed in part 1 and part 2 of this series.

As people of all ages practicing social distancing are discovering, the isolation can be very uncomfortable. This is especially relevant to older adults, who may already be coping with a diminished social network.

**DON'T:** Assume they can't do it. Many older people were early adopters of technology and remain adept users. Even newcomers are capable of learning new skills and may find they enjoy discovering new ways to communicate.

**DO:** Explore options. If they are not current users, now is a great time to patiently introduce them to the various social media and other online tools for community/connection that most of us are using.

**DO:** Build on existing foundations. If your older friend or relative has a laptop or tablet and uses e-mail, try sending an invitation to an online meeting. You can call them on the phone and coach them through accepting the invitation, signing up for the app, opening the meeting, and turning on their laptop or tablet camera and microphone. Then they can teach other friends and start setting up the virtual book clubs, games, and discussions the younger set have been enjoying.

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## PART 6: RESPECT YOUR ELDERS!

*To help you discuss your concerns about the pandemic with older friends and family members, first ground yourself in a deep and accurate understanding of the medical facts and psychosocial realities they and you are confronting, discussed in part 1 and part 2 of this series.*

### Avoid Elderspeak

Elderspeak is the equivalent of babytalk, only used on older adults. Referring to older people and their behavior as cute is not uncommon. Though tolerated, elderspeak is often harmful. Many older people may feel offended or infantilized, even if they don't express it. Do not treat older adults like children. Treat them like the adults they are and speak to them as peers, just as you would wish to be treated and spoken to in their situation.

### Acknowledge Experience

Remember, our parents and grandparents have been through times of illness, uncertainty, economic crisis, and war before now. Their experiences and memories may influence their perceived risk of COVID-19. Certainly discuss the current facts, guidelines, and precautions, but also listen to their experiences and trust their wisdom. Even if you don't agree with all of their thinking, knowing that their ideas are informed by a lifetime of survived hardships should help you respect those ideas. Listening to their stories may not reduce your concerns about them or about the current situation, but it may be helpful nevertheless. It can give you perspective, give them validation, and create common ground for you both.

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## PART 7: ACCEPT LIMITATIONS

*To help you discuss your concerns about the pandemic with older friends and family members, first ground yourself in a deep and accurate understanding of the medical facts and psychosocial realities they and you are confronting, discussed in part 1 and part 2 of this series.*

There is no magic formula to guarantee you and your older friends and family members will agree on how to cope with COVID-19. As we learned in part 2 of this series, how older adults prioritize their safety and independence will vary by the individual.

What you can do is share with them your feelings, both positive and negative, and the way their behaviors impact your state of mind. You can listen when they express their feelings and be open to their ideas.

Ideally, speaking candidly and listening attentively can improve your communication so that you can hear, respect, trust, and understand each other, and compromise accordingly.

Everyone is emotionally vulnerable in the current situation. The more open and respectful the communication, the better.

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