

An illustration on a dark blue background shows a caregiver in a yellow top leaning over to serve a red cup of tea on a saucer to an elderly woman with white hair, who is sitting in a red armchair. The woman is smiling and gesturing with her hand. A small green plant is visible in the bottom right corner.

COVID-19 anxiety and staying mentally healthy

TIPS FOR RESIDENTIAL AGED CARE COMMUNITIES

During this coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, residential aged care homes are facing increased difficulties in managing procedures to reduce risk to residents and balance the need for social contact. This outbreak has also caused anxiety for staff, residents and their families who may feel unsupported, isolated, depressed or anxious.

It is important that reasonable precautions are implemented, however, we also need to learn to manage our emotions to avoid high levels of distress, anxiety and panic. The following tips may help to keep stress and anxiety at bay during this challenging period.

Learn the facts (but limit media exposure)

Stay up-to-date with factual information from reliable sources such as the Australian Government Department of Health (bit.ly/380OwHe), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (bit.ly/39MEml8), or the World Health Organization (bit.ly/3cQUwCw), and follow Australian government recommendations (bit.ly/2XRk5OG).

The constant influx of information and media coverage about COVID-19 can actually make us feel more anxious and concerned. Try to limit how often you are exposed to news updates on COVID-19. Take breaks from both media coverage and COVID-19 conversations throughout the day so you can focus on other things.

Keep things in perspective

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unravel, we all worry about how this is going to affect our own and our family's health. Try to keep your concerns in perspective. Rather than imagining the worst-case scenario, ask yourself the following questions.

What are the actual levels of risk? Are there other facts that are important to remember in this situation?

Current evidence suggests that good hygiene (regular handwashing, sneezing and coughing into your elbow) and keeping appropriate physical distances are very good strategies for reducing the risk of getting COVID-19. If you do these things you have the ability to greatly reduce your risk. It is also

important to remember that even if you do contract COVID-19, most people recover. Although people over the age of 60 are at greater risk of serious or life-threatening health complications, even with this increased risk, the large majority of older adults who contract this illness will recover.

Know the difference between symptoms of COVID-19 and those of cold and flu, but also try limiting how often you monitor changes in your physical sensations. For example, don't excessively check your temperature if you are otherwise feeling well.

Am I overestimating how bad the consequences will be and underestimating my ability to cope?

Consider how you (or your family) have gotten through difficulties in the past, and whether these coping skills might help you to get through this situation. Remind yourself that even though things might be difficult now, many of the consequences are time limited (ill health, financial burden, supply shortages), and will eventually improve.

Change some of your routine if needed. For example, discuss whether you should postpone non-essential doctor's appointments, including wellness visits. Telehealth consultations, if available, can be a reasonable substitute. Speak to a staff member, call your GP or call your pharmacist to enquire about access to prescription medications and alternative methods of collection if necessary.

Have respectful and open conversations with your family, friends and staff about your health concerns. Ask about what precautions they are taking to reduce your health risks, and what to do if you are concerned about your health.

Practise physical distancing but ensure social connection

Current recommendations advise practising social distancing as a way to prevent or slow the spread of COVID-19. However this really refers to ensuring you keep a physical distance from others where possible. Unfortunately this can also result in reduced social contact, which can be especially problematic for people who are already socially isolated or feeling lonely. Research has shown that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of physical and mental health problems.

Social distancing doesn't mean locking yourself in your room. Engaging in social activities is still possible while maintaining physical distance, but it does take some creative and flexible thinking. If you practise good hygiene and keep your physical distance from others, you can still sit outside, do gardening, sit on the porch, get your mail, talk to others and participate in activities in your facility. Ask staff to set up alternative activities you can complete while keeping physical distance from others. For more ideas for maintaining social connections go to bit.ly/2UsdXcm.

Some aged care homes will continue to restrict some or all face-to-face visits by family or friends. Instead of face-to-face contact with family and friends, consider using the phone, video, email and postal mail, if possible. You may need help from a staff member to set up the appropriate technology for you, or to organise for mail to be posted. Some families and friends are keeping in touch from across a fence or behind a window.

Maintain self-care and stay active

It is important to maintain healthy habits and routine, including restful sleep, regular exercise and eating a balanced diet. Plan to do pleasant activities (e.g., singing/dancing/listening to music, doing crafts, reading) or activities that give you a sense of achievement or satisfaction (e.g., cleaning out the cupboard or completing paperwork). There is no need for you to give up all the things you enjoy – you just need to be more vigilant. Regularly do activities that make you feel less stressed.

Tips for families and staff to support residents distressed by the coronavirus outbreak

- Check in with residents and ask how they are feeling. Talk to them about how they are managing changes to their routine.
- Offer practical and/or emotional support if needed (e.g., offer to deliver a meal, or magazines).
- Encourage them to do things that they enjoy – engage them in facility activities.
- Keep up contact by writing emails, letters and cards, sending photos and getting children to do a drawing for them.
- Arrange regular phone calls and video calls. Family might need to ask staff to assist with this.
- Consider contactless visits, where you can visit from across a fence or window.
- If you think they are not coping, or are overly isolated, help them seek help from their GP, or encourage them to speak with staff. There are a range of services available to help them to get access to mental health support – psychologists and mental health professionals may still be allowed access to visit residents during this period. See below for contact information for a range of services that may be able to help.

Remember...

There are steps you can take to help protect yourself, and those around you. Practising good hygiene, physical distancing, and following government recommendations will help you make a difference. You can do things to help those around you, whether that is preventing the spread of illness or by supporting others socially or emotionally. As a community, we can work together to get through this challenging time and we all have a role to play.

More information

Primary Health Networks

Primary Health Networks have been funded by the Australian Government to provide psychological services to residential aged care facilities. Speak to the residential home care manager to learn if they have access to such services. bit.ly/34HGBlf

The Swinburne national telehealth counselling and support service

This free service has been developed to support residents, families and staff through the COVID-19 period. Trained counsellors (postgraduate health care students and provisionally registered psychologists) are available to stay in touch by phone or video calls to provide emotional support.

03 9214 8653

National COVID-19 Older Persons Information Line

A new COVID-19 hotline has been established to help older Australians get the critical information they need to stay healthy and safe during the pandemic, providing an accessible one-stop source for personal support, questions and up-to-date guidelines. bit.ly/2xWKqQL

Dementia Support Australia

Dementia Support Australia can offer support, advice, consultation and referral services to people living with dementia, care workers, health professionals and family carers who are supporting a person with dementia experiencing behaviours and psychological changes that are impacting their care. www.dementia.com.au

Dementia Australia

Dementia Australia has online tip sheets for residential aged care providers, training webinars on supporting people with dementia and a national helpline to provide information, referrals and support to families, carers and healthcare practitioners. www.dementia.org.au

Australian Psychological Society (APS) Find a Psychologist

The APS Find a Psychologist service is a directory that lists thousands of APS registered psychologists around Australia. psychology.org.au/Find-a-Psychologist

Carers Australia

Carers Australia is a good resource for any family or carers needing support and information. They have branches in each state as well as a counselling service and many useful resources www.carersaustralia.com.au

Acknowledgments




This resource was prepared by the APS Psychology and Ageing Interest Group Committee.



The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

Visit psychology.org.au for more.

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