

Older and Wiser: Seniors must prioritize their mental health in this ongoing pandemic

There are resources available to help you get through this

Margaret Coates January 18, 2022



As many seniors are asking "will this pandemic ever end," it is more important than ever to take care of your mental health, writes columnist Margaret Coates. Getty Images

In the last few weeks, many of us are asking: is this pandemic, which has interrupted our lives for so long, ever going to end?

For some of us though, it is more than a horrible interruption in our lifestyles. In a column I wrote last year, I established that the pandemic had adversely affected the mental health of many seniors. The column concluded that the pandemic had been a significant factor in increasing feelings of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and stress.

It seems that the mental health of some seniors has not improved, and indeed may have worsened. Recently, research from the Canadian Longitudinal Study of Aging found that older adults had twice the depressive symptoms during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic. It also found that those with lower income and poorer health experienced a greater impact. A 2021 Statistics Canada report, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian seniors," confirmed this. "Changes in mental health over the course of the pandemic suggest that mental health of both younger (18 to 64) and older (65 and older) Canadians has gotten worse," it concluded.

As well, other research has found the negative feelings may be exacerbated for older adults, who may be at higher risk for infection, especially those with severe underlying medical conditions like heart or lung disease.

For those with Alzheimer's disease, the pandemic has caused major impacts. The Alzheimer Society of British Columbia website talks about those impacts.

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, people living with dementia and their caregivers have faced greater isolation and upheaval than ever before," the society notes.

Throughout January (Alzheimer's Awareness Month), the society is asking the public to visit www.dontchange.ca to view stories from people living with dementia, caregivers, friends, and family.

On a personal level, I am also encountering more seniors expressing some mental health issues. Of course, in the dead of winter, many of us feel down. But I think the ongoing nature of the pandemic is having an affect on many of us.

Many of us continue to worry about the uncertain future: can we continue to bear the ongoing nature of the pandemic socially and financially? We are concerned about being able to get back to normal – seeing friends and family easily without restrictions on numbers or being in an indoor setting. We are worried about our health and the health of our loved ones. We are asking: will we ever be able to take a trip to visit relatives and friends farther afield? I know I have missed my bi-yearly trip to visit my stepdaughter and family in Australia.

These thoughts that we have do not contribute to positive mental health or outlook. So, what interventions can help? The Canadian Mental Health Association suggests:

- try to keep things in perspective (notice and challenge your thoughts if they may be extreme or unhelpful)

- try eating healthy, and engaging in enjoyable activities; seek information from reliable news sources only

- limit checking in on the latest news to short, defined periods – with no more Trumpian antics this may be easier to do

- remain focused on things that are within your control, such as washing hands, covering your mouth during coughs and sneezes and avoiding non-essential travel.

Other suggestions might include setting a new daily routine, being kind to one another and yourself, getting a good night's sleep, staying connected, and seeking help when you need it. Exercising at home or walking outdoors (while keeping a safe distance) can provide an uplifting mood boost.

It is important that within the confines of the pandemic you seek out social situations and interactions (even if only virtually or by phone) so that you can stay socially connected and avoid being lonely.

The McMaster Optimal Aging Portal, a resource run by McMaster University, states that “evidence has also shown that sharing personal stories and memories can help reduce feelings of loneliness and depression. A phone call or video chat with a friend or family member can be good for the soul!”

Many of the seniors organizations on the North Shore are offering limited programming and friendly phoning if you cannot or will not visit their centres. You can look up these organizations in the 2021 Seniors Directory published by North Shore News and available at North Shore Community Resources Society (604-982-3302).

If you feel you need more mental health support, try phoning the Canadian Mental Health Agency at 604-987-6959, or the Older Adult Mental Health Program-North Vancouver at 604-982-5600. As well, Family Services of the North Shore has set up a free and sliding scale phone-in counselling service at 604-988-5281.

For those reading this column who are doing OK, now more than ever, it is important to check in with friends and family members (by phone or through means such as email, as opposed to in-person visits) to see how they are doing.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 51 years and has worked for and with seniors for twenty-six of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome – email lions_view@telus.net