

PROMOTING INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION DURING A TIME OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

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Loneliness and isolation in the older adult population is a growing concern with 1 in 3 reporting a lack of regular companionship (AARP, 2018; CIGNA, 2020). Feelings of loneliness and isolation may be compounded in the older adult residing in a long-term care facility (LTCF) and are of even greater concern during the recent COVID-19 pandemic with social distancing and visitor restrictions to long term care and assisted living facilities (CDC, 2020a). Prior to the pandemic, surveys suggested (CIGNA, 2020) young adults aged 18 to 22 experienced the greatest degree of loneliness with 79% reporting being lonely and that loneliness was not restricted to the older adult.

There are numerous well documented physical and psychological sequelae to loneliness and isolation in the older adult including cognitive and functional decline, poor health outcomes, and increased rates of hospitalizations and mortality (Kasper & Friedman, 2020; NIA, 2019). Over a 10-year period in young adults aged 18 to 34, had increases in drug related deaths (108%) alcohol-related (69%), and suicides (35%) (Trust for America's Health, 2019). Both the older and young adult need opportunities for connection.

Students in a baccalaureate nursing program (n=213) voluntarily participated in a service learning project providing weekly mail interaction with 734 residents in 11 long term care facilities in a 3-county area from May 1st to November 20th, 2020. The primary purpose of the project was to connect older adults in the long-term care setting with nursing students while social distancing mandates were in place for both the residents and the students (CMS, 2020). Students received community service hours for participation in the project.

After an introductory letter, students sent artwork, crafts, and other creative correspondence. The project promoted intergenerational connectedness in a time of isolation allowing older adults to connect without advanced technology. Although there are a growing number of older adults who are technologically adept, there remains a significant number of older adults (specifically those 75 years and older, less affluent, or with lower levels of educational attainment) who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with technology or have physical issues making the use of technology difficult (Anderson & Perrin, 2017; Hunsaker & Hargittai, 2018).

Several students continued to correspond with residents past the project date without the earning of hours and even past graduation from the nursing program. Facilities report residents looked forward to their mail weekly and the artwork was on display throughout the building. The letters served to remind residents that someone was thinking of them and they were not alone (Brown, 2020; CDC, 2020b).

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