

## **We need connection, we need each other**

*By Ellen Waldman*

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These past 18 months have changed all of our lives, to put it mildly. Many people have had to make major adjustments to what they normally enjoy doing. For older adults, the inability to socialize has been very costly to their health and well-being. One woman living at a local retirement community missed having the communal meals and other activities so much, that she has developed a severe skin condition. The doctor felt it was likely caused by stress and loneliness.

Here's some info to consider regarding this impact. In June of last year, 13 percent of those surveyed by the C.D.C. said they had either started or increased substance use to deal with stress or emotions related to the pandemic. A nationwide survey found that one in four adults reported drinking more this past year to manage their stress. There are also higher incidences of eating disorders, depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. In addition, many are experiencing burnout, loneliness, sleep problems and the ongoing stress of being a caregiver. Others just feel like they are languishing.

The New York Times, (8/20/21) offered these questions to consider. They might indicate that a mental health issue needs to be addressed. Especially in older adults, too often these signs are overlooked by the doctor or the person themselves.

Are you or a loved one struggling to get through the day, or feeling persistently sad, irritable or anxious?

Have you withdrawn from your loved ones or are you arguing more often?

Have you thought about harming yourself?

Have there been changes in your sleeping or eating patterns?

Are you using drugs or alcohol to cope?

Have you had difficulty concentrating or making decisions?

If you recognize yourself, there are resources available to assist you. Let's start with simple self-care routines that were found to be quite effective. Many people started a daily meditation or exercise practice, like yoga or walking. Some people found maintaining routines helpful; others loved the freedom of an unscheduled day. People discovered new hobbies and new ways to connect with friends. Zoom seemed to be one method, as did meeting outdoors, when the air quality allowed. It's important to find people in your life who you trust and can talk to about both the good and bad that may happen. Experts recommend taking regular breaks from your electronic devices and eating healthy meals. Simply getting enough sleep, including napping, really helps.

In addition to these self-directed ideas, there is also expert assistance available. One to consider that's provided free of charge through the State of Oregon is Safe and Strong:

<https://www.safestrongoregon.org>). Their tag line is: If you're having trouble coping, you're not alone.

Check out their website for an array of resources. To start, there's lots about the Covid-19 vaccine. There are also sections that address mental and emotional health, how care for yourself, and further resources in the community. They reference one of the best resources for older adults, the Aging and Disability Resource Connection. I have written about them many times, as they are a gateway to many other services. Please keep in mind that all are impacted by staffing shortages, so try to be patient.

Another important source for help is the Senior Loneliness Line: 503-200-1633, <http://seniorlonelinessline.org>. Although it's based in northern Oregon, it's open to all who want to have a confidential phone conversation with a trained volunteer.

Ashland has a program, the Senior Phone Buddy (541-488-5342; [seniorinfo@ashland.or.us](mailto:seniorinfo@ashland.or.us)), which will match seniors with local volunteers for regular calls.

If you or someone you know has indicated they have considered ending their life, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. It's never the wrong call to make, even if you're not certain they would actually harm themselves.

We need connection, we need community, we need one another. During times of extreme stress, conditions ask us to make the extra efforts required. Find what works for you and please keep going. Life is still full of joy and surprises.