

Pandemic making the lonely even lonelier

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New research into the impact of COVID-19 on elder Australians has revealed that the pandemic and associated restrictions around the country have increased feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

Commissioned by mental health charity **spur:org** as part of their award-winning elder isolation campaign, #OLDMATE, the research primarily aimed to understand how relationships have shifted during the pandemic between older Australians and those around them.

“Those who already had foundational support structures before COVID are not faring too much worse in the short term. However, the biggest area of concern is those who were already experiencing social isolation and loneliness before COVID and how much that has increased,” said spur:org Director Lee Crockford.

“Australians aged 85 and over already suicide at the highest rate of any other age group in the country. So, understanding how we might support them at this time is critical.”

The research isn't all bad news. It also shows many relationships have successfully pivoted during the pandemic as Australians consciously try to stay in touch with elders and help out more where possible.

“Even brief interactions like a phone call can be enough to support elders in the short term,” explained Lead Researcher Steph Perry.

“It's important to note there is a huge difference between being alone and experiencing loneliness, which ultimately comes down to how much control they feel they have. Elders who are able to find joy and interest in the things around them, even if that's alone, are experiencing much lower levels of anxiety and sadness. That could be as simple as maintaining a routine or leaning into hobbies.”

The research identified six key resilience factors amongst elders: Autonomy, sense of purpose, capacity, access to information, access to resources, and social networks.

“We hope this research will not only help those in the mental health space or aged service providers, but also help the general population understand how they can support elders in their life,” added Crockford.

The full results are open-source, and available to download at oldmate.org.au/research.

The research, conducted in with spur:org, Ipsos, AMSRO, and ESOMAR, was completed in a two-phased research approach starting with a qualitative component validated in a quantitative online survey with a sample of 1000 people.

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