

Engaging Older Adults During Social Distancing First Wave of Covid-19: June-August 2020

Briefing prepared by:
Centennial College and the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre

Project Overview

Social distancing (SD) measures to control the spread of COVID-19 are having an impact on individuals across all age groups. In particular, it presents a serious public health concern to older adults because distancing can affect cognitive, immune, cardiovascular and mental health¹. Social relationships with family members, friends and peers and a daily routine, all of which contribute to positive health outcomes in older adults, have been interrupted by COVID-19 and will be for the near to mid-future.

A major issue tied to older adult community engagement is the economic health of the organizations that support these activities. These organizations are currently under threat; securing funding to support operations is a challenge during even the best of economic times. With all on-site program delivery on hold, income that typically would have been generated and used to sustain subsidized programs has ceased to flow. It is vital to explore the needs and wants of older community program members in order to ensure that community centres can develop evidence-based innovation in outreach and engagement that supports older adults. When a community organization's staff is sensitive and responsive to the complex, emerging needs of their community they can weather challenges and maintain programs². Proactive measures taken with older adults, such as online technologies and community outreach activities, could potentially reduce mid to long term personal and health sector costs.

In May 2020, Centennial College was awarded a Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada's (NSERC) COVID-19, Rapid Response grant, for a collaborative project with Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre (MNjcc) to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of older adults during SD (First Wave), and to determine best practices in engagement and support from community-based organizations.

Key Findings

The following section examines insight gained from both the survey responses and in-depth interviews, which have been put into two main themes: (1) Impact of SD on older adults and (2) Older adults' engagement in MNjcc programming during SD.

¹ Mitchell, S., & Shortell, S. (2000). The governance and management of effective community health partnerships: A typology for research, policy and practice. *The Millbank Quarterly*, 78, 2, 241-289.

This insight reflects experiences during the first wave of social distancing in Toronto, as data were collected from June to August 2020. A survey was conducted online and by telephone with 265 older adults who are members of the MNjcc community. The survey was developed to explore how seniors were experiencing life during the JCC's building closure, to measure MNjcc virtual program use and experience during SD, as well as effectiveness of MNjcc maintaining connections with the senior community. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight older MNjcc community members of varying backgrounds and abilities, who were regular and active program participants before COVID-19 to better understand the experience of social distancing, the challenges, coping mechanisms and participants' recommendations.

1. Impact of SD on Older Adults

Older adults experienced a decline in quality of life and community connection, and increase in loneliness. Four percent reported quality of life as 'poor/fair' before SD; during SD this rose to 31%. Nine percent described their community connection as 'poor/fair' before SD; during SD this rose to 51%. The percentage who described how often they felt lonely as 'not at all' or 'rarely' was 63% before SD; this fell to 41% during SD. Participants physical (29%) and social health (28%) were the most affected due to changes in routine and lack of access to programs, services, and facilities.

1.1. Factors Influencing Quality Life, Social Connection, Loneliness and Health

Feelings of Unease and Concern

Participants described their fears of contracting the virus, particularly because they were older.

Social Connections

Due to SD restrictions, many felt their connections with family, friends, and ties to the community were constrained, which was difficult and impacted their overall quality of life.

Daily Routine and Meaningful Activities

Participants reported that the abrupt loss of regular activities at the start of social distancing came as a shock and had a significant impact on their well-being.

1.3 Ways of Coping During SD


Positive Mindset and Resilience

Some participants were trying to put social distancing into perspective and reflecting on what they had, rather than what they were missing.

Staying Engaged and Embracing Technology

Participants set small daily goals, kept to schedules and established routines to provide structure and feelings of accomplishment. Many moved their regular activities online (e.g., attending online courses or events), while others continued to engage outside socially distanced (e.g., walking with friends).

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 750 Spadina Ave., Toronto, Ontario M5S2J2

 416.924.6211

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Reaching Out and Helping Each Other

Social distancing had enhanced their connection to the community. Being less caught up in a busy life meant more opportunities to assess and reflect on the value of relationships. Participants also stressed the importance of reaching out for help when needed.

2. Older Adults Engagement in MNjcc Programming During SD

Only 45% were engaged in MNjcc virtual programming during the First Wave of SD and the number of MNjcc programs attended on average monthly fell during SD. While some participants were still enrolled in one to three programs, that percentage fell from 62% before SD to 35% during SD. Heavy program use (five to more than six programs) fell from 13% before SD to 10% during SD. Benefits of attending MNjcc programming included: 'entertainment/education': (32%), followed by 'it connects me to community (22%) and 'I feel less isolated' (20%). Participants mostly missed MNjcc arts and culture programs (40%), followed by the fitness programs (21%), the loss of their regular routine (11%) and as a place to socialize and make friends (14%). Almost 35% of participants said they would only feel comfortable returning to the MNjcc after a vaccine had been developed and a quarter (26%) replied 'immediately'.

2.1. Virtual Program and Technology Barriers

55% of those surveyed were not engaged in virtual MNjcc activities due to challenges related to programming (e.g., awareness, appeal, access) and technology (e.g., access, digital literacy). Technological barriers were a main factor for participants not engaged in MNjcc online programming, which included lack of access to appropriate technology, such digital devices, email addresses, internet, and webcams/microphone. As well, many admitted they had low levels of digital literacy, to troubleshoot when they had technical issues attending an online program (e.g., registering or navigating Zoom), while others just felt uncomfortable being seen and engaging on camera.

Key Recommendations

Based on participant feedback, three major themes are proposed for community-based organizations to support older adults during SD: the need for technical support /training, enhanced communication and programming recommendations.

Technical support and training

- Digital literacy training to older adults
- Helping with upgrading devices/internet connection
- Easier, user-friendly access to On-Demand events and online registration
- Technical support during virtual program and events
- Training facilitators for online programming

Communication

- Regular, ongoing communication from community centre staff (e.g., online newsletters, email, telephone calls)



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- Continued check-ins with vulnerable older adults
- Reminders about upcoming events, new courses and what the community centre was doing regarding responding to social distancing mandates
- Exploring which volunteer roles could continue as is or be modified through SD

Programming Recommendations

- Continue with virtual events even after SD
- Programming in indoor and outdoor environments
- More peer-led and small interest groups
- Specialized fitness and self-care programs for seniors and people with disabilities
- Opportunities for participant interactions
- Providing introductions during programs to welcome new members
- Free or discounted programming for low-income older adults

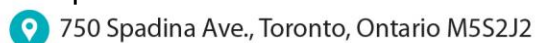
Conclusion

This study highlighted how the first wave of COVID-19 SD restrictions had taken a toll on older adults' quality of life, sense of social connections and loneliness and health. Feelings of unease and concern, social connections and daily routine and meaningful activities were key factors contributing to the quality of life and health outcomes, as well as feelings of community connection and loneliness. That said, many are coping well by having a positive mindset and resilience, staying engaged and embracing technology. Reaching out and helping each other were ways in which older adults were coping.

This research demonstrates that community centre programs can provide resources to help older adults weather the constraints of social distancing and future challenges. However, older adults face unique challenges engaging in virtual programs, relating to programming (e.g., awareness, appeal, access) and technology (e.g., access, digital literacy). Community centre staff will need to continue to employ effective means of communication, creative approaches to program delivery and develop new ways to support the technology used to deliver the types of programs older adults are seeking to support health and well-being.

These findings were shared with seniors and partner organizations through an interactive webinar in December 2020, final reports were disseminated to the community in spring of 2021, and they continue to inform how the MNjcc provides virtual programs and services for seniors, both during and beyond SD restrictions due to COVID-19.

Given the unprecedented nature of COVID-19, this research provides practical strategies as well as rapid and evidence-based insight on the impact of social distancing on older adults. Insight from this research benefits community centres and organizations that cater to the needs of older adults and senior citizens, as well as designers of leadership interventions, sociologists, community organizers, policy makers, government funding agencies, and charities and philanthropic institutions focused on funding transformative social practice.



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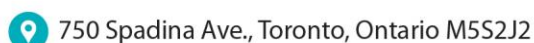
Centennial College is Ontario's first community college. Established in 1966, the college primarily serves the eastern portion of the Greater Toronto Area through five campuses and seven satellite locations. Our college is best known for its record of exemplary teaching, innovative programming and extensive partnership building. In 2020, Centennial College established the Social Innovation Research Centre, which collaborates with community partners to address and solve community problems through applied research projects.

The Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre strives to be an inclusive and welcoming hub for healthy and joyful community, anchored in Jewish values, where all downtown Toronto feel they belong. More than 1,800 older adults and seniors annually come into the MNjcc to participate in a wide range recreational, educational, health and wellness, and arts and cultural programs.

Since the beginning of COVID-19 SD restrictions, the MNjcc has explored ways in which virtual programs and services for older adults could be improved. Two weeks after the building closure in March 2020, the MNjcc began offering a wide range of virtual programs specifically curated for older adults and seniors at either a nominal cost or free, including lectures focusing on history, music, theatre, film and Jewish identity; community choirs and virtual concerts; film screenings; meet the author events, book launches and a book club; and a wide range of fitness and mindfulness programs. An MNjcc staff member attended every virtual event, ensuring that community members felt comfortable with the technology and personally welcomed. Extra time was added at the beginning and end of each program for socializing.

The MNjcc also began mailouts of holiday cards in partnership with the Centre's schools, initiating penpal opportunities, rotating weekly check-in phone calls from staff, and a volunteer phone tree to maintain connections with seniors who did not possess/were not using technology. In direct response to the recommendation of engaging more volunteers and peer-led programs, some new virtual seniors' programs were created in summer 2020, including an adaptive Movement and Dance program and a Seniors Support Group, both led by new Lay Leaders.

As technology support and the 'grey divide' was a significant research finding, in April 2021 the Miles Nadal JCC, in partnership with Centennial College, was awarded a one-year New Horizons for Seniors grant: Peer to Peer Technical Intervention in Seniors Communities, to provide equipment, technology training and mentorship to 10 seniors in the MNjcc community.



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