

The Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 on Older Adults

The coronavirus pandemic has affected people profoundly across the world, but has had particularly marked ramifications for the elderly. This resource is devoted to identifying areas of concern regarding older adults' (aged 60+) wellbeing in response to COVID-19, and providing information and support guided by reliable scientific evidence.

Older Adults Are More Likely to Contract COVID-19

International epidemiological data indicates that the elderly are the most at-risk group for COVID-19 severity and mortality (Gardner et al., 2020). This owes to physical, psychological, social, and environmental vulnerabilities influenced by the ageing process.

This can include a decreased immune response, disabilities or poor mobility, cognitive and sensory deficits, greater comorbidities and hospitalisations, which may heighten the chance of contracting or experiencing complications related to COVID-19 (Gardner et al., 2020). Congestive cardiac failure, sepsis, and respiratory complications like pneumonia and mechanical ventilation are the among the most prevalent of these (Banerjee, 2020).



Existing and/or Developing Mental Health Conditions

The aforementioned vulnerabilities can have extreme implications for mental health, and can contribute to heightening older adults' susceptibility to mental health problems, as well as worsening existing conditions (Banerjee, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, pervasive misinformation and mass hysteria has given rise to amplified health anxiety, panic, adjustment disorders, depression, chronic peritraumatic stress, and insomnia (Strutt et al., 2021). In particular, extant research has identified that one-third of older adults have experienced depression, and 1 in 5 experienced elevated anxiety and/or psychological distress during the March-May lockdown (Strutt et al., 2021).

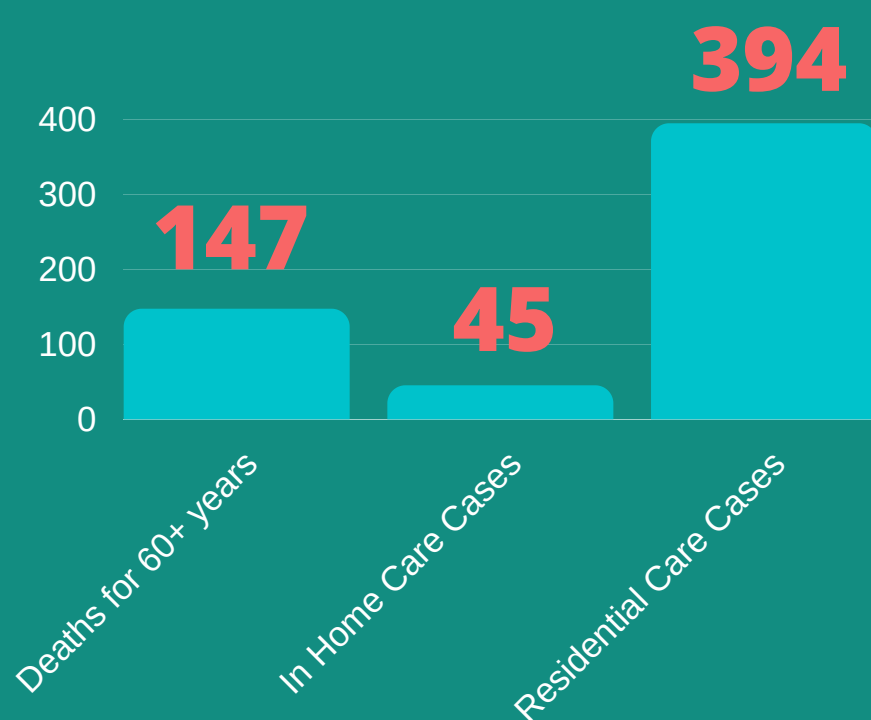
Despite measures like social distancing reducing transmission, they have also prevented participation in pastimes, socialisation, and instilled feelings of loneliness and isolation among the elderly. This is compounded by generational technological incompetence, which prevents use of alternative communication like video chat or email to contact family and friends. Strutt et al. (2021) corroborates this, as specific emotion regulation strategies, social and family engagement, and adoption of new technologies have been associated with better emotional health and quality of life.



Aged Care Facilities as a Risk to Wellbeing

Living in aged care facilities has been linked with anxiety disorders, depression and suicide, as well as cognitive decline, mood disturbances, wandering and psychotic symptoms (Javed et al., 2020). This can worsen paranoia, stress and panic caused by the pandemic, and lead to mistrust and avoidance of public health protocols like quarantine, social distancing and general hygiene.

Mistreatment and worker misconduct in aged care facilities can also add to this by increasing mistrust, paranoid tendencies and trauma (Javed et al., 2020). This can have serious consequences if there is a COVID-19 outbreak, and can also cause severe distress for those affected by conditions such as Alzheimer's. Between January and July, 2020, 394 Australian cases emerged from residential aged care, while 45 came from in home care.



Implications and Resources for Older Adults During COVID-19

To minimise or manage the marked detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on elderly people's mental wellbeing, strategies such as the following should be implemented: accessible telephone counselling services and COVID-19 resources, distanced but regular interactions with family and friends, developing an adjusted routine with exercise and leisure activities, ensuring good hygiene and wearing a mask to reduce health anxiety, etc.

Older adults, individuals caring for the elderly, or other service providers can access mental health and wellbeing support through the following resources:

Lifeline Australia (13 11 14), Beyond Blue (1800 51 48 or coronavirus.beyondblue.or.au), Black Dog Institute (9382 2991), The National COVID Older Persons Information Line (1800 171 866), Carers Australia (1800 242 636).

References

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