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Understanding the Impact of Social Distancing on Older Adults and Senior Organizations to Better Adapt Towards a New Normal

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BACKGROUND

The lifespan of the average American adult has increased over the past few decades. The Healthy People 2020 Initiative projected that the population over the age of 65 will increase from 46.3 million in 2014 to 98 million by 2060 (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2014). A growing number of older adults wish to age in place within their community (Leland & Elliot, 2012). The risk for social isolation increases as people age, which can lead to depression, premature death and cognitive decline (National Institute of Health, 2019). Leisure and social participation within the community contribute to an individual's autonomy, self-determination, and quality of life (Dattilo et al., 2015).

PROBLEM

At the beginning of 2020, a fast spreading virus called COVID-19 led to a global pandemic. By March 2020, many states within the United States began shutting down non-essential businesses and enforced social distancing mandates to reduce the spread. Adults 65 years and older are at a higher risk for severe illness from the virus (CDC, 2020). With the virus becoming a new barrier to meaningful social participation in the community, the risk for social isolation took on a new importance.

PURPOSE

Understand the impact of social distancing on older adults and senior organizations to better inform the role of occupational therapy (OT) in helping seniors adapt towards a new normal within the community.

METHODS

Independently living community dwelling seniors (n=42) ages 65 plus and senior organizations (n=5; 3 senior centers and 2 senior resource organizations) from around the country were recruited by convenience sample to participate in phone interviews. Verbal consent was taken prior to audio recording interviews. Senior interviews were apart of an IRB approved study and organization interviews were apart of a separate needs assessment for overall capstone project.

Senior Sample Interview Questions

- How are you remaining social/connected during this time?
- How have your daily routines changed during social distancing?
- How do you feel about going back into the community once social distancing mandates are lifted?

Additional questions regarding technology, health, physical activity, and loneliness were asked to gain a holistic perspective.

Senior Organization Sample Interview Questions

- During the pandemic, what challenges did your organization face and how did you adapt?
- What challenges or needs do you foresee for the senior population once social distancing mandates are lifted?
- How does your organization plan on making seniors feels safe when reintegrating back into community recreation?

Analysis

All interview audio was transcribed onto a Word document. Senior interviews were coded with Dedoose. All data was analyzed using Braun and Clark (2006) Thematic Analysis to identify overarching themes.

RESULTS

Senior Interview Themes

Initial Impact

- Facing a New Reality
- Lost Time and Freedom
- Loss of Meaningful Social Participation

"I realized this is scary – I got scared and I don't want to leave the house. Maybe I need to stay home, then I'm stuck, I can't do my normal activities, I'm losing privileges this is scary, how long is it going to go on, when will it end. I feel we are being robbed of our time" - Participant 5

Adaptations

- Staying Connected
- Remaining Engaged in Purposeful Occupations
- Silver Lining

"I think my friends and family all feel the value of family and friends, we are more aware of the value of connection and to be with family and friends, I value that more than ever" - Participant 30

Future Outlook

- Cautious Community Return
- Desire for Meaningful Social Contact
- Accepting a New Normal

"I have asthma and it scares me willy nilly to think that I could die of this thing so I kind of see that I may not be as active out in the community as I was before – just for the fear it's going to be there... " - Participant 20

Senior Organization Themes

Impact on Services

Preventing Social Isolation

Adapting Towards a New Normal

"How do we help seniors recover? When is it safe, and what protocols do we use?"- Senior Organization 5

DISCUSSION

The long-lasting effects of social distancing on the physical, mental, and social health of older adults is unknown. At this time, older adults within this study expressed feelings of unease around returning to community activities along with strong desire for social contact. Senior organizations are working on staying connected to seniors within their respective communities, making virtual programming accessible, and concerned about aiding in their recovery after social distancing. These findings can inform senior organizations and OT on senior experiences and help anticipate their future needs.

CONCLUSION

There is opportunity for occupational therapy to play a role in recovery and helping seniors adapt towards a new normal within the community.

- Helping seniors create new routines that support autonomy and engagement in purpose driven occupations to enhance quality of life.
- Provide support during various stages of transitioning towards a new normal and recommend adaptations as necessary.
- Programming to teach skills in technology and creating supportive virtual environments that enrich social participation.

