

BROADCAST SCRIPT-Older adults face ‘double whammy’ as pandemic lingers

Newly released research about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nursing home residents say they suffered significantly.

For a year-and-a-half, older individuals had the double burden they typically face because of diminishing social circles because of their age. Add to that – the implementation of COVID-19 safety measures that required enforced isolation. Dr. Denise Dechow (pronounced DECK-ow), a psychiatrist at OSF HealthCare in Galesburg, Illinois, says the so called ‘double whammy,’ presented a significant mental health risk for older people in long-term care.

In fact, [research from the AARP Foundation](#), conducted last year, showed the isolation and loneliness had an alarming impact nursing home residents’ quality of life – a 50% increased risk of developing dementia, a 32% increased risk of stroke and a nearly fourfold increased risk of death among heart failure patients.

Dr. Dechow specializes in geriatric psychiatry so she regularly treats nursing home residents by visiting their facilities. She says patients who had trouble hearing and seeing really struggled with the technology for virtual visits. In-person visits with masking and face shields also made those visits challenging for older patients, particularly those who have already experienced some cognitive decline during isolation.

“It was difficult for patients. They did not recognize who you were. It was often very frightening to them and they could not hear you through all the layers of PPE. So, although these were better than the virtual visits, there were still many limitations.” (:17)

Some nursing homes with COVID-19 outbreaks required patients to remain in their rooms, so residents experienced even more isolation than usual. That, in turn, affected their physical and mental health, Dr. Dechow says.

“Feelings of loneliness can lead to increased risk of depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, aggression, impulsivity and suicidal thoughts.” (:22)

The pandemic prevented many families from gathering and holding funerals, even after deaths caused by conditions other than COVID-19.

Dr. Dechow says many older adults, especially those in nursing homes, suffered from prolonged grief disorder (PGD). In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe, individuals have trouble recovering from the loss.

“And this has to do with prolonging symptoms of anxiety, depression, sadness and sleep disturbance. What we notice is that we can’t *not* participate in these rituals. These are important and must take place, even if it’s a year after someone has passed.” (:21)

The risk of PGD is higher in older adults and those with a psychiatric history.

Illinois recently approved a law requiring nursing homes to provide equipment and trained staff for virtual medical and social visits, as well as for church services when in-person visits are prohibited or restricted due to federal or state rule or guidance.

Dr. Dechow also supports recommendations from an advocacy group which recommends nursing homes hire older, peer support specialists. Dechow says those specialists could be trained and accredited to provide Medicaid and/or Medicare reimbursable telehealth support.

“Encouraging them to use technology for some of the support that they have been lacking because some of the older adults are very hesitant to use any of the technology because they don’t understand it and it scares them.” (:16)

Legislation signed by Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker in June indicates technology and assistive equipment may be funded through federal Civil Monetary Penalty (CMP) Funds and/or other state and federal resources.

***** FOR WEBSITE STORY**

If you or a loved one are suffering from the impact of loneliness and isolation, OSF HealthCare offers free [behavioral health navigation services](#) to help understand all resources available in your area.