

Keeping your Elderly Relatives Top-of-Mind this Winter

The holiday season is well underway and winter is practically here. This time of year typically consists of visits with grandma and grandpa and many family get-togethers filled with annual traditions. This winter, the best gift you can give to your elderly loved ones is the gift of health and that might mean re-thinking how you connect.

Virtual visits with relatives are still the number one route for safe socializing. However, families across the country may want to see their elderly loved ones in person so that they do not feel so isolated. If this is the route you choose to take, there are a few key protocols to follow before and during your visit, in addition to some “outside-the-box” alternatives.

“It’s definitely very important to limit your personal circle and other people’s circles if you know that they are going to be in contact with your elderly relative. Sometimes monitoring yourself for a good 10 to 14 days before making that visit because that could be the incubation period – you may not have noticed that you have symptoms but you may have been in contact with somebody who may have been in contact with somebody else with the virus. So unfortunately it does spread very quickly,” explains Rasha Atallah, M.D., family medicine physician, OSF HealthCare.

If you are age 65 or older and have increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends avoiding indoor in-person gatherings with people who do not live in your household, and visits should be done outdoors when possible. There also are alternative ways to “visit” with your elderly relatives this holiday season that include minimal person-to-person contact.

“Not only do we want to check in on them, but we want to make sure that they have their essential needs. Whether it’s food, household supplies, and even making sure that they have proper heat, proper water running. So checking in on them can be done by phone, by video. And if you do need to make an actual visit, make sure that it is limited to very few people going in and out of the house. And if you do have to go inside, make sure that you are washing your hands, covering your face, and staying a safe distance,” says Dr. Atallah.

In addition to dropping off an occasional meal to loved ones, Dr. Atallah recommends even doing their weekly shopping for them.

“Another great idea might be to make sure that you drop off some groceries for them to limit their exposure to the grocery store and making sure that you are FaceTiming with them or video chatting with them if possible for them. Just using those technologies that we have available to maximize contact in a safe manner,” Dr. Atallah says.

Making the time for weekly virtual visits, calling to see what grandma or grandpa may need around the house, and other safe avenues for keeping your elderly relatives company this holiday season are encouraged because they are beneficial for your loved one’s mental health.

“I think one of the big things that is going under-discussed within a household is the emotional effect that this pandemic is having on people, especially the elderly population who have probably been able to go out to their community centers prior to this, maybe go to their churches or their mosques or their synagogues and socialize with their friends that now they can’t do anymore. So realizing that depression and anxiety is a real thing,” cautions Dr. Atallah.

In fact, according to the CDC, depression is the most [prevalent mental health issue among older adults](#). This risk increases during the holiday season. So check on and visit with your elderly relatives, but do so safely. They might be resistant to the new way of communicating, but it is important to remind them that avoiding in-person gatherings is the best choice to keep them safe, healthy, and available for many more future in-person visits when the COVID-19 pandemic winds down.

If you or a loved one is struggling with stress, anxiety or depression during this isolated holiday season and it is not an emergency, you can reach out to an OSF Behavioral Health navigator by calling (309) 308-8150. They can direct you to the right resource for what you’re experiencing. [OSF SilverCloud](#) is a no-cost online resource available 24/7.