

# Balancing Older Adults' Physical Safety with Emotional and Social Needs During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Bev Ziefflie MAEd, BScN, RN; Deb Norton MSc, BEd, RN; Paula Mayer RN; Susan Page MSA, BSN, RN & Heather Nelson PhD(c), MA, BScN, RN



## BACKGROUND

As of October 1, 2021, **93.7% of deaths** due to Covid-19 in Canada were individuals **over the age of 60** (Government of Canada, 2021). Older adults were asked to socially isolate to protect their physical health.

Isolation efforts helped protect the physical health of older adults during the outbreak, but had impacts on older adults' social and emotional health.

How did the experience of older adults' socially isolating during the Covid-19 pandemic change through the first nine months?

## METHODOLOGY

**Thematic analysis** with a patient-oriented approach was used (Braun & Clarke, 2004)

Two patients (older adults who were socially isolating) were **involved as full team members** throughout the research.

**Thematic analysis** of the interviews looked specifically at **emotional and social impacts and feelings of safety**.

## METHODS

**40 independently living, retired older adults**, over the age of 60, were interviewed on the phone four times; in April, May, June, and December 2020.

## THEMES

### THEME 1: PERCEPTION OF PHYSICAL SAFETY

Older adults' **concerns were highest at the outset of the pandemic** in March and April of 2019. For many, **perceptions of risk decreased** over time and their **need to be with and support their children and grandchildren became a larger concern**.

As people felt safer and government regulations lifted, they **expanded their bubbles and often visited outdoors**.

In November and December, older adults were still concerned about physical safety, but were **less willing to give up their social lives**.

"I was really conscious of my mortality in a way that I'd never have been before, ever. Because I don't think about age... I just never think about it. And suddenly it's in my face all the time. And it scared me. I don't think about that anymore. I'm still really cautious, but I don't feel scared anymore."

### THEME 2: EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

All participants experienced some form of negative emotional impact. Early in the pandemic, **feelings of anxiety and lack of control** were predominant. **Depression, loneliness, and frustration** were experienced at varying levels throughout the first 10 months Covid-19 regulations **worsened feelings of loneliness and depression in individuals who were struggling prior to the pandemic**.

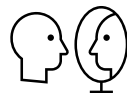
"I miss people and I miss my family and everything like that, so I guess that's a little bit of depression."

"I feel like I am in jail except I've got to make my own meals."

### THEME 3: ADAPTING TO CHANGING ROLES

#### Losing Sense of Self

Participants' roles were taken away. Participants who were formerly independent were now relying on others.



#### Carrying On

Older adults found purpose through activities and retaining connections with their family and friends.



#### Will this ever end?

Covid-19 was no longer seen as short term and many participants were concerned that they might never go back to "normal".



## CONCLUSION

Covid-19 continues to impact older adults' social and emotional health.

**Future pandemic plans need to be proactive** in addressing mental health needs to find a balance between physical health and social and emotional health.

The social and emotional impacts of Covid-19 are **going to continue to impact older adults** long after the virus has been managed.



## REFERENCES

Government of Canada (2021). *Covid-19 daily epidemiological update*. <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/epidemiological-summary-covid-19-cases.html>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>