



Concerned about an Elderly Family Member or Friend?

Concern about an elderly family member or friend can significantly add to the stress and worry we are all feeling about the Coronavirus. We know these individuals are at increased risk should they contract the virus, and that they must practice social distancing and, in some instances, self-quarantine. The following suggestions may help you provide important support to the elderly individuals in your life.

Managing the Risk

Begin by having a conversation about what social distancing means and the importance of limiting contact with others. For many elders, the best course of action will be to remain at home. You may encounter resistance to this idea, especially if there are issues of cognitive impairment – or from fiercely independent seniors who want to do things like going out to stores themselves. It will be important for all family members and friends to be delivering the same consistent message around the seriousness of this virus and the actions the elderly need to take.

Managing Anxiety

With the knowledge of added risk, comes added anxiety and fear. Seniors need the reassurance that frequent contact from you provides. They need to hear you will support them while they are house bound and should they become ill. A daily call at a planned time can be an anchor in their lives. Encourage them to avoid watching the news continually (good advice for all of us) as it is likely to increase their worry and fear. Discuss what will happen if they become ill, and how you will ensure they are cared for. Offer hope that this will not happen.

Isolation and Boredom

For active seniors the threat to their mental health can be almost as significant as the danger to their physical wellbeing. Help think of ways to structure their time to alleviate the boredom and sense of isolation. Are there hobbies they can resurrect (e.g. knitting, jigsaw puzzles)? Unfinished projects (e.g. writing the family history, sorting through pictures)? Can they face time with grandchildren? Watch favorite old movies? Organize family members to send cards as most seniors still enjoy receiving mail they can read and re-read.

Some Practical Considerations

- Make sure seniors have adequate food and supplies, including a supply of medication. (Know what medications they take.)
- Plan for what happens if they get sick. Identify who will care for them.

- If you are at a distance, identify other sources of support in the community that can check in and deliver food. Consider their church, town services, the Council on Aging, neighbors and other community groups to which they belong.
- Stress the importance of contacting their health care provider at the first sign of illness.
- Trust the caregivers you have in place, or the facility. This is not a good time to make a drastic change and may be impossible to achieve safely.

Take Care of Yourself

As a caregiver or support person, it's important to manage your own anxiety and take care of yourself. Limit your own TV watching, get some exercise, eat sensibly, limit substance use, follow a structured routine if you are house bound (e.g. get up at a regular time, dress, plan your day). Think about what has helped you manage during other stressful times and do those things.