San Gabriel Hospice
Compassionate Service

COVID-19 Newsletter for Families

Questions? Call Us!

866-996-2172 (toll-free)

Helpful tips for family caregivers

Winter holidays and COVID

Wouldn't it be nice to get back to normal? Or at least gain the comfort of gathering with family during the holidays. Unfortunately, the virus doesn't care. It thrives on people and their connections. (We don't say "going viral" for nothing.)

The sad truth is that people you love who live outside your household—even in the same neighborhood or town—can infect you. They don't mean to. It's simply a numbers game. And with COVID, more is not merrier. We all have to be very careful. To that end, we dedicate this issue to making the holidays as safe and soul nourishing as possible.

Gifts for the socially isolated

As concern about in-person gatherings grows, the issue of isolation looms large. Social isolation has been extremely difficult for many older adults.

How to offset loneliness during these challenging times?
Consider these possibilities:

Bird feeders. While spending time in nature has been shown to improve mental well-being, it turns out that watching birds—even from your window—is associated with less depression, stress, and anxiety. The number of species is not as important as the number of birds. It's their interactions and getting to know their personalities that provides inner calm. Before you purchase a feeder, think about the logistics of installment. Feeders set up outside a window allow for easy wintertime viewing. But be mindful of cats or other predators. Include seed or suet with your gift and make sure access for installing and filling the feeder does not require a ladder or trundling across icy or uneven terrain.

Audiobooks. For those who live alone, it's nice to have an option besides television to hear another person's voice. Consider a subscription to an audiobook service. Or research the local library's arrangements for checking out audible books.

Technology that makes calling easier. From simplified smartphones and tablets, to voice-activated assistants, there are many options to choose from. When it comes to reducing depression, research shows that video calls are far more effective than voice-only conversations. And no surprise, focus groups with seniors yield high marks for voice assistants that include a monitor or screen (think "Alexa Show"). As a gift, be sure you plan for the costs and logistics of tech setup and troubleshooting, as well as monthly service charges for wi-fi connection and/or phone accounts.

Robo-pets. The state of Florida health department recently began a program of distributing robo-cats and -dogs to older adults with dementia. These lifelike pets can purr (or bark), tilt their heads, lift a paw, open and close their eyes, and respond to voice and touch. Studies show a marked calming effect with fewer needs for medication related to pain, mood, or behavior problems. Even older adults with no memory problems enjoy the "animals," reporting the robo-pets eased their sense of loneliness and gave them an increased sense of purpose.

"My grandmother couldn't really handle a pet. But the bird feeder brightens her day. She giggles every time she sits down to watch the birds' antics."

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San Gabriel Hospice supports older adults and their families in greater Los Angeles.

Give us a call at 866-996-2172 (toll-free) to find out how we can support you.

Traveling for the holidays

There really is no such thing as a "safe" journey during COVID: For the traveler, for the people they are going to visit, or for those they will return to. That said, the risks can be reduced.

- **Pay attention to the local conditions.** Is the launch point or destination a hot spot? Cities may decide to bar visitors. That may also apply for the return trip home.
- **Driving solo is best.** Bring food from home to eat. Wear masks and wash hands, with only short stops for gas or the restroom.
- **Hotel risks can be lowered.** Ask for a room that has not been occupied for 24 hours. Clean and disinfect doorknobs, faucets, countertops, the TV remote. Decline maid service. Avoid time spent in common areas, such as the lobby.
- **Reduce risks on planes.** Avoid peak travel days, and travel at night. Wear an N95 mask and stay six feet apart in lines and on board. Book with airlines that leave the middle seat open. Bring wet wipes to wipe down the back of the seat, armrests, and tables. Use hand sanitizer often. Minimize conversation.
- **Get two negative tests with self-quarantine in between.** One test is not enough. A person may be too early in the infection to register an accurate result. Or can get infected between the test and whenever they arrive at their destination. Plus, tests can deliver a false negative. A 14-day self-quarantine after the first test is optimal. This takes preplanning. A college student, for instance, might get a negative test, come home early, and self-quarantine in an isolated room in the house, emerging only after a second negative result arrives before the gathering.
- **Plan for the possibility of quarantine after.** Self-isolation may be required upon return by place of employment, school, or local health orders. Alternatively, news may arrive of exposure at the family event, requiring two weeks of self-quarantine afterward.
- **Not feeling well? Been exposed? Don't travel!**

Gathering together

The Centers for Disease Control now says that indoor family gatherings are a primary source of the recent viral surge. Unless your gathering is with people already living in your household, extreme caution is required.

Safety precautions. The fewer people, the better. Gather outdoors, perhaps around a fire pit (socially distanced marshmallow roasting?). If indoors, leave windows open. Keep it short—an hour. Wear masks when not eating, even children as young as two. Remain six feet apart, particularly at the dinner table. No hugs or singing. (Sigh)

Evaluate whether grandparents should attend. Older adults (65+) are at great risk. Doubly so if they are over age 85, overweight, diabetic, or a smoker and/or have a heart, lung, or kidney disorder or cancer. This is a critical decision.

For the host. Minimize the number of people handling food, glasses, and utensils. Food prep is ideally done by one person who wears a mask, washes hands frequently, and serves up the food to individual plates from the kitchen. No self-serve buffet or passing of platters, condiments, or drinks. Use disposable glasses, plates, and utensils. Ask guests to bring hand sanitizer to use before and after meals. Open windows in the bathroom, replace hand towels with a roll of paper towels, and ask guests to leave 60 seconds between users.

You can easily have a safer get-together online.

- Cook from a shared recipe and eat "together" via Zoom
- Play a virtual game—Kahoots is popular
- Use Netflix Party (or other streaming equivalents) to simultaneously watch a favorite family movie
- Watch the same online religious service
- Consider creating a remote ritual, such as lighting a candle and sharing a blessing, or each singing a favorite song and posting it on a scrapbook website

Let's do what we can to have a holiday we won't regret.

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