Social Engagement While Physical Distancing: A new role for evidence-based programs during the Covid-19 pandemic

Jennifer Raymond, Vice-Chair (EBLC) and Chief Strategy Officer (Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley)

The importance of social engagement is clearer now than ever. As more states issue stay-at-home orders or advisories, we are all trying to find create ways to stay connected: phone calls to family members, FaceTime with friends and loved ones, lunches and other social gatherings via ZOOM, and even “virtual book clubs”. These technologies allow us to practice “social distancing” while remaining engaged with people that are important to us.

For older adults, social isolation has been a reality even before our current pandemic. This isolation often has a negative impact on health and well-being, including cognitive decline, depression and heart disease. Community based organizations have long understood the impact of social isolation on older adults and have provide multiple services to improve connectedness: Meals on Wheels drivers who visit the home daily, “friendly visitors” who provide companionship, congregate meals sites, field trips, social activities at the local senior center or YMCA and group evidence-based programs where people both stay connected and gain valuable health and wellness information. Many of these practices are being creatively adapted given our new reality to allow us to keep reaching out to older adults in our communities.

Evidence-based programs are no different. While community-based group programs can’t be done in the same way, many program developers and administrators have offered...
guidance on modifying the delivery mechanism to address current needs. This guidance takes into account the value of social connectedness, the importance of program fidelity, and the imperative that delivery modifications do not present the potential for harm to participants. For example, the Self-Management Resource Center is currently allowing licensed organizations to offer it’s [Chronic Disease Self-Management program via Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting or other technology platforms](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/). One-on-one programs like [PEARLS, Healthy IDEAS, Enhance Wellness](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/), and [CAPABLE](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/) can now be done in full or in part via the telephone and other virtual technology. Programs that involve exercise or physical activity (like [A Matter of Balance, Fit and Strong!](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/), and [Enhance Fitness](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/)) are more challenging to offer virtually given the need for individuals to stay safe. In these cases, program developers have offered safe alternatives for physical activity, including [resources and videos](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/) from the National Institute on Aging. You can find more information on guidance on these permissible delivery mechanisms at [http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/](http://www.eblcprograms.org/about-us/news/).

In this time of fear, uncertainty and physical distancing, evidence-based programs present an opportunity for older adults to stay engaged and feel less socially disconnected. By partnering with program administrators, we can continue to offer these valuable programs, reduce social isolation, and improve physical and mental well-being.