

Isolation and Loneliness: Using Social Media to Reconnect

By Olympia Sanchez

What is social isolation?

Social isolation is a phenomenon that can impact the lives of older adults in a variety of ways and can lead to different outcomes. Social isolation occurs when older adults distance themselves from friends and family, sometimes selectively, and can involve the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods, and services. Most often though, isolation occurs due to circumstances that add up to be too much in older age. Things such as losing a spouse, living alone, becoming less physically or mentally able, living in unsafe areas, language barriers, and having a low income can all be variables that contribute to isolation. Now with the pandemic having caused a worldwide quarantine, we are even more inclined to look at the effects of isolation.

[According to the AARP Foundation](#), in the United States:

- 17% of adults aged 65 and older are isolated
- 26% are at an increased risk of early death due to subjective feeling of loneliness
- 46% of women age 75 and older live alone
- 6 million adults aged 65 and older have a disability that does not allow them to leave their home without help



In early research about the effects of isolation, the concern was that when isolated, older adults could not make material and symbolic exchange with the community that added contributions to the larger society. While still true, with newer studies we are now beginning to understand the effects of isolation and how it not only affects the quality of life of an individual, but also the cohesiveness of an aging society as a whole. In the occupational therapy perspective, our biggest

concern for individuals living in social isolation is that they may not be living meaningful and purposeful lives, which is at the essence of our practice. The risks associated with isolation are comparable to risks of cognitive decline such as depression and dementia, and obesity due to a lack of physical activity and high blood pressure. Older adults are in the age group that is more vulnerable to isolation and to be impacted by it than any other age group. If you or a loved one is experiencing symptoms that are associated with isolation such as depression, signs of cognitive decline, it is important to talk to your primary doctor in order to assess them, symptoms and be able to address them.

It is also believed by some that isolation and exclusion are things that are slowly built up throughout the life course. That as a person begins to slowly lose function of their body and mind, they are slowly disengaging themselves from certain activities, places, and people due to simply not being able to do or perform or engage in those activities until they're no longer participating at all. The environmental factors of our lives are key in understanding our health. For these reasons, we want to make it a priority to understand social isolation and exclusion in older individuals so that we can address those barriers to lead to a more fulfilling life. One of the ways that we will be addressing isolation and exclusion in this article is with the use of social media and technology.



Not only being able to communicate with others but to have people that you can constantly rely on, friendships that offer admiration, respect, and love are essential to the human spirit. These are things that are easily accessible using today's technology. Some older adults may feel like learning how to use newer technology is difficult but on the contrary, once you learn the basics of using the internet, the entire world's knowledge can be at your fingertips. As you already many know, sites such as [Google.com](https://www.google.com) can offer you a wide range

of resources and the site [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) can offer you videos to learn things where you can easily pause, rewind, or re-watch them.

If you or someone you know is feeling lonely due to any of these circumstances: death of a spouse or close friends, no nearby relatives, inability to leave your home, etc., and do not have any social media accounts, in this article we will be providing you resources on how to create them, use them, and benefit from them. Specifically, we will be helping you to create a Facebook and an Instagram account; two of the most popular forms of social media for all ages.

But briefly, here is some info on older adults and social media

Currently, almost half of all internet users ages 50-64 have social media accounts and only 26% of users aged 64 and older have social media accounts. Recent studies have shown that older adults in the US aged 65 and up are among the least likely to have access to high speed internet. While not that surprising, evidence did show that once those older adults did have



access to high speed internet, they began to rely on it and used it as a tool in their everyday lives. If you do not have access to high speed internet, here is a link to get you started at looking at [providers in your area](#). There is written information as well as phone numbers to places near you that can help you figure out a plan that's best for you.

So, why do older adults seem to like social media so much once they start using it? Well, with the use of social media, we are able to check up on friends, see what others are up to, and are able to reconnect with friends from the past to provide a powerful support network. One can also find online support groups and connect with people who are in similar situations as you. Especially for individuals who are retired, living alone, or have some physical disability, reaching

out and socializing in your preferred setting with potentially hundreds of people at one time is possible.

Devices

The device that we would most recommend if you could only choose one, is a smart phone. It is small, lightweight, portable, and easily to care for. Many of you may already have a smart phone but if you do not, going to a local Verizon, AT&T, or other smartphone provider would be very helpful so that the staff can help you pick the right device and brand for you. Plus, you can test out all of the phones and purchase extra accessories for it in the same place. The employees will also be able to help you set up the phone you choose, set up you basic account to be able to download applications, and show you the basics on how to use it. Facebook is accessible using a smartphone or computer, but Instagram is better accessible using a smart phone. In addition, you can take photos or videos on your smart phone and then can easily share that content without having to transfer photos from a camera to a computer. It's all in one spot.

Do you have an email account? If not, you will need one!

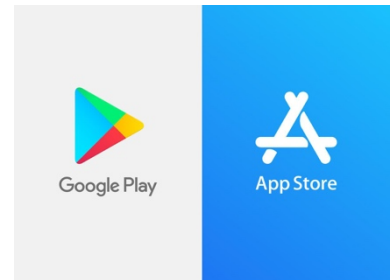
Here in this article, we will be providing you with resources on how to start your journey with social media if you have not yet. Before creating either a Facebook or Instagram, an email address is required. Many people are familiar with emailing systems and have an email but if you do not, here is a great website that suggests 5 emailing systems that are easy to use, free, and include good support if something is not working right.

[5 best email clients for seniors to start emailing in no time](#)



And now, let's begin with how to create a Facebook and Instagram account!

First thing you need to do is to download the phone applications Facebook and Instagram. You can do so in your phone's app store. They are free downloads. One thing that will make things much easier is to start by creating your Facebook account first. The reason why is because it is simple to link the two once the Facebook account has been created. When you first open the Instagram application on your phone, it will ask you if you want to sign-up using your Facebook account in which you would click that particular button, sign in using your email and password from Facebook, and just like that you will have both Facebook and Instagram using one log in and password. Google Play is the App store for android phones and App Store is for Apple phones.



[How to make a Facebook account](#)

CLICK HERE



Facebook, or FB as some nickname it, is one of the most popular social media platforms of all time. You can search for and add friends, political figures, celebrities, and send instant messages to people you know. You can post pictures, videos, and write posts. You can also search

and join certain groups of content that you like. For example some very popular groups are [Smitten Kitchen](#) for those who love to cook, [Fab After Fifty](#) which is a page for women aged 50 and up, and [Senior Planet](#) which is a resource Facebook page for older people who want to stay engaged. Here is a short video tutorial on [how to use the Facebook App](#).

Give yourself time to learn and familiarize yourself with the app. There is a lot of cool things that one can do on there!

[How to create an Instagram account](#)

CLICK HERE



Instagram, or just Insta, is another highly popular social media platform that seems to have its own appeal to some people. It's also very popular among younger crowds so chances are if you have grandkids, they're on there and you can follow them there.

Instagram is a bit different than Facebook in that it is only for posting photos and videos but again, you can search for people you know and request to follow them. Here is another video resource on [how you can use Insta](#). One cool feature with Instagram is that if you did create the account connected with your Facebook, you can set it up to where anything that you post on your Instagram page will also automatically be posted onto your Facebook page.

What are the benefits?

As we have mentioned throughout this article, there are many benefits to using social media such as keeping in close contact and connection with family and friends, socializing with the community, and sharing your own thoughts, photos, and videos. From my own personal experience with my grandmother, using social media has made her feel like she is more involved in the lives of her grandkids who live all over the state and she says this makes her feel so happy. She no longer lives in her native country and so though social media, she has been able to connect with her family and friends who still live in Mexico. Now we joke with her that she is like a teenager and we can't catch her without her phone! An older adult who is feeling like they are lonely or do not have friends can once again feel like they are connecting with people who they want to be close to or want to get to know.

Even though quarantine is officially over for us, for some, leaving their home may not be an easily available option. Having the option to connect with people right in your home is such a great option for many.

Closing Remarks

If you need help setting up these accounts or learning how to use a new device, ask your friends and family! Having one of your grandchildren over to help learn some of these things is a fun way to get together and converse with them. Remember, it's not a good idea to replace physical social interactions with just social media. Actual human contact and connections are very important for adults who are feeling lonely. These suggestions are to help you feel more involved in the things you want and to stay connected with the one's you love and care about.

If you need further help or there is no one in your area who can help you, please feel free to reach out to us occupational therapy students here at Wayne State University! We would be more than happy to help you. Here is the link to our faculty page:

<https://cphs.wayne.edu/occupational-therapy/faculty.php>

Please feel free to reach out to any of our great staff to have an OT student help you.

Notes

Please feel free to print this page for your reference or for someone you know. All of the hyperlinked resources can also be found below as well as the sites that we used for further information.

Works referenced in this article:

Combating Loneliness and Isolation with Technology:

<https://www.k4connect.com/combating-loneliness-and-isolation-with-technology/>

AARP Foundation: Connect 2 Affect

<https://www.k4connect.com/combating-loneliness-and-isolation-with-technology/>

Social Exclusion of Older Persons: A Scoping Review and Conceptual Framework

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10433-016-0398-8>

Older Adults and Technology Use:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/04/03/older-adults-and-technology-use/>

Older Adults and Social Media:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2010/08/27/older-adults-and-social-media/>

Site to help you find local internet providers:

<https://www.inmyarea.com/>

Windows Report: 5 best email clients for seniors to start emailing in no time

<https://windowsreport.com/email-client-seniors/>

Social media groups the elderly should follow:

<https://www.companionstairlifts.co.uk/news/social-media-groups-the-elderly-should-follow>

Hyperlinked Videos:

How to create a Facebook account:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkKnIRQO2KI&t=7s>

How to use Facebook: App Tutorial

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ciSB5yoM0U0>

How to create an Instagram account:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEAZkFpVF_U

How to use Instagram: Beginners guide

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= wo5C9qh4xE>