

OPINION
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OPINION – Connections post COVID to become the new ‘norm’ Jane Mussared, Chief Executive, COTA SA

Social distancing has helped flatten the COVID-19 curve and keep many of us safe, but it has also made us walk in the shoes of thousands of older South Australians – and that’s timely.

While for many these extraordinary circumstances will be temporary, for an increasing number of older people, it’s not so different from every other day.

Growing older is a privilege and many tackle it with enthusiasm, positivity and grace. However, there are others who, through poor health, disability, lack of mobility or physical distance, are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness and disconnection from family, friends and their community.

Having been confined to our homes and unable to easily visit family and friends we, now more than ever, have an understanding of what it might be like for some older people.

The South Australian community has been resilient, steadfast and generous in the face of adversity. South Australians have particularly looked for ways to connect with older people in the midst of the pandemic, knowing that the double jeopardy of digital exclusion and increased vulnerability has been particularly hard.

Many older people who had already dipped their toe into digital media have now well and truly bitten the bullet and have embraced new technologies to connect with loved ones such as Zoom, Skype and FaceTime.

For older people not online, more traditional approaches like the telephone, letter writing and chats over the fence have provided important connections. All forms of communication have their place and should become part of our everyday.

We have all learnt a lot about the power of community and the gift of time in the process. We can’t afford to let go of those lessons even once we start to see a light at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel.

When this is all over, when the virus is no longer a threat, when many have returned to work, when we are able to visit our friends and family freely and drink coffee at a café, what of our new habits or behaviours will we continue?

It’s easy to get caught up in our own worlds when ‘busy’ becomes a badge of honour again – let’s not.

The importance of maintaining contact with older family members and neighbours – online and in person – cannot be understated.

Approximately 25 percent of South Australians over the age of 50 live alone, a statistic that increases with age.

We know very little about the extent, impact and harm caused by social isolation and loneliness among older people. While the risks from loneliness have been likened to the harm from cigarette smoking, we have not yet paid enough attention to effective ways to reduce it including for people who cannot connect online.

Our new habit of standing by one another as we blunt the unthinkable threat of a widespread COVID-19 infection in South Australia has been welcomed by older South Australians. They have enjoyed the regular calls, the conversations, the opportunity to discuss and exchange views and the outreach from their community.

So please, keep finding time and opportunities to visit older family members, keep up your neighbourliness and seek out opportunities through community visitor programs like COTA Visitors – let's embrace these connections as the new norm when "normality" is restored.

COTA SA is an older people's movement and the peak body representing the rights, interests and futures of more than 633,000 older South Australians aged over 50.

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