

Think Social Distancing Is Tough? Consider the Confined Elderly

By Irv Sternberg

If you are feeling a bit sorry for yourself because of the social restrictions you must now endure, like keeping six feet apart from other homo sapiens (Latin for human beings), consider those living under even more severe requirements—the elderly in assisted living facilities or in independent living apartments.

For those people, their only opportunity for socializing occurs at mealtime when they gather in a dining room to exchange greetings and have conversation. (Their relatives and friends long ago were told not to visit.) Now, these folks are confined to their rooms or apartments where their meals are delivered to them. They eat alone. The only sounds they hear are the ticking of a clock, or maybe the TV or radio.

I have a friend living in such a facility. Even though there is an enclosed courtyard at the rear of her building—closed to the public—she is not allowed to go outside for a short stroll and some fresh air. She's not even permitted to walk in the corridor, or go downstairs to mail a letter. And Heaven forbid if she suggests leaving the building for a few hours to visit a relative or friend. Should she do that, they warn her, she'll be quarantined for two weeks. So what? She's already in quarantine!

Actually, she's in total confinement, like a prisoner in a jail. My friend has not been outside her little apartment in a month. Fortunately, she can see the snow-covered Front Range from her third floor window. And because she's a stable senior, emotionally mature, and with a lively sense of humor, she seems to be coping. She reads, does crossword puzzles, watches TV and calls friends and relatives. But she admits to being lonely. That's what worries me. How long can she cope under these circumstances?

They are the people who most need interaction. There are warnings about how we are treating these seniors. Isolation and loneliness can be fatal. There is a 45% increased risk of death in seniors who report feeling lonely, according to the Health Resources and Services Administration.

In their determination to protect seniors (and staff) from contracting Coronavirus, the administrators of such buildings seem to be ignoring the mental health of the people under their care. That is wrong.

I don't understand why my friend can't stroll alone in the courtyard and sit alone on a bench there for 15 minutes whenever the weather is nice. And the same for her neighbors if they wish.

What a difference it would make in their outlook—and their lives.