

Social atrophy as a byproduct of COVID, its impact, and a remedy for older adults

By Jamie Levin, Founder of Conversation & Company



Jamie Levin is a specialist on aging, and a former psychotherapist. She founded [Conversation & Company](#) which provides in-home and virtual social visits with older adults. Her work focuses on reducing loneliness and providing support during transitions through thoughtful conversation.

The global pandemic has changed our lives in measurable and definitive ways. Mandated social distancing and the fear of contracting COVID has led to what mental health professionals refer to as social atrophy, or the decline in interpersonal skills caused by limited social engagement.

The phenomenon of social atrophy has been universally felt, as in-person events, in-office meetings, dinner parties, family gatherings, and coffee dates resumed. In those first clunky social exchanges, reconnecting was often awkward. Feelings of discomfort around physical contact (“Should we hug, shake hands, or fist bump?”) and the effort required to socialize were acutely felt. (“I don’t remember meeting new people being so exhausting!”)

Though the term social atrophy is new, researchers have spent years studying the concept in specific populations, including inmates in solitary confinement and individuals who choose hermitic lifestyles. Their findings have consistently shown that social isolation and its counterpart, loneliness, have profound detrimental effects on health and well-being, including higher rates of anxiety and depression, increased risk of heart disease and stroke, and reduced life satisfaction.

As in-person activities resume, those who have greater access to social occasions are more likely to quickly regain pre-COVID social aptitude. However, for individuals at a higher risk for loneliness, such as older adults, it won’t be so simple.

Aging is often linked with increased rates of isolation and loneliness, which means that opportunities to regain losses in social ability are more limited for older adults. As the elderly fall out of practice, socializing may cause feelings of self-consciousness. Spending too much time alone tends to make it more difficult to relate to others and engage in small talk. It negatively affects self-esteem. With fewer positive interactions, people tend to isolate further to avoid the discomfort of being around others, thus perpetuating social atrophy, the loneliness cycle, and the negative health consequences that come with both.

How can we help alleviate social atrophy in older adults?

The main objective is to help them comfortably reengage and rebuild social networks. One-on-one visits tend to be more palatable and less anxiety-provoking than larger groups. When working with older adults whom I’ve recently met, I pair our conversation with an activity like taking a walk or working on a puzzle together. I find that having a secondary focus that doesn’t require constant eye contact helps to alleviate discomfort and reduce the complications of social interplay (e.g., interpreting words, gestures, and expressions accurately and responding appropriately).

Another method I use—which requires a collaborative and focused approach with friends, family, and caregivers—is to create a social calendar with the goal of having at least one meaningful interaction per day. I recommend creating a schedule with set times to connect with others. For instance, every Tuesday is a phone call to a granddaughter, or a Thursday Facetime with an out-of-state friend. The key is creating opportunities for consistent social engagement, even if it lasts only 15 or 20 minutes. When working with older adults, reminders and prompts are particularly useful. Amazon Echo or Google Home Mini can be programmed to audibly announce calendar meetings before they begin, thus serving as handy reminders for upcoming appointments.

Rebuilding these skills will require patience and persistence. Reentering the social realm can be anxiety-provoking, but the best remedy is practice. Do your best to pleasantly encourage these interactions and engage the older adult at a pace that feels comfortable to them.

Social atrophy, if left untreated, has consequences that extend far beyond the stumbling social exchange. Research has proven strong social networks and meaningful interactions have a direct impact on quality of life and longevity. Consequently, it is important to proactively take steps to include social connectivity as part of a healthy lifestyle—right up there with diet, exercise, and rest. ■