

December 2022

Boomers, Elders, & More E-Newsletter

Monthly Elder Care Newsletter of the Vanderbilt Child & Family Center



Caregiver Support Group

The VCFC Caregiver Support Group is a monthly group that offers a safe place to discuss the challenges and rewards of providing care for an aging loved one. In lieu of a group session VCFC is hosting a drive-through “Celebration of the Caregiver” on Wednesday, December 14, 2022 with an invitation for participants to pick up a box lunch and a self-care goodie bag between 12:00 PM – 12:30 PM at The Acorn School at 1810 Edgehill (next to ROTC) – parking is available in the VCFC Parent Parking spots. Reservation required please email Jennifer Main (famcenter@vanderbilt.edu) by December 12th to reserve your treat!

Quick Notes for Preparing Healthy Holiday Meals with Seniors

The nutritional requirements for elderly persons are different from the rest of the family. It is important to consider a few points while cooking for elders for their digestive health.

Ensure plates include lean proteins like chicken, eggs, beans, and seafood. Serve foods with little to no added sugar, saturated fats, and sodium. Always consider allergies and other important factors. Make it pretty - being thoughtful with color and texture to encourage appetite!



Mid-Cumberland Meals-on-Wheels has the joy of serving the senior citizen population of 13 counties in middle Tennessee delivering meals, smiles, and love for 46 years!
<https://www.mc-mealsonwheels.com/need-meals>

Reducing Loneliness: How to Help Seniors During the Holidays

[Carol Bradley Bursack](#), *Minding Our Elders*

There is a lot of pressure on people to enjoy themselves during the holidays. The season is supposed to be merry and bright, but many elders feel increasingly isolated and unhappy this time of year—even before the coronavirus pandemic complicated everyday life and special occasions. Understandably, families are still concerned about how minimizing COVID-19 risk will affect their holiday plans with aging loved ones this year.

Why Seniors Experience Holiday Loneliness

While aging can bring wisdom and experience, there are inevitable losses that even the healthiest seniors face. Loved ones and friends fall ill and pass away. Energy and mobility levels often decrease, resulting in feelings of lost independence and opportunities. Neighborhoods change over time, leaving even those well enough to remain in their own homes feeling lonely and disconnected from their communities. According to the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) (NIMH), socially isolated older adults are at higher risk for depression. The focus on family, friends and togetherness during this time of year can actually bring melancholy feelings to the forefront for many elders. It's more important than ever to be supportive of and attentive to our loved ones, but in ways that keep everyone as safe and healthy as possible.

If you believe that an aging parent, friend or neighbor may be feeling lonely or [depressed](#), there are steps you can take to help lift their spirits. You are probably busy with adapting your own holiday plans and traditions, but we must remind ourselves what the holiday season is truly about. Simplifying some things will allow you to focus on what really matters: the important people in your life. Use these ideas to brighten up a loved one's winter season.

10 Tips for Reducing Loneliness During the Holidays

1. Make a point of actively listening when your loved one wants to talk, even if the discussion is negative. An honest and empathetic conversation can help them process what is bothering them, whether they are mourning a loss or coming to terms with

new challenges in life. It may also reveal why they are feeling down and inspire other ways of lifting their spirits.

2. Remind them how important they are as a part of your life, your family members' lives and these annual holiday celebrations. They may feel useless or burdensome if they cannot contribute to or fully participate in the festivities like they used to. Encourage them to do what they are capable of and be especially careful not to act like what you do for them is done out of a sense of duty. Show them they are loved.
3. Over the years, holiday cards often bring bad news and diminish in quantity. I used to sit with my mom when she opened her cards because so many of them brought news of illness or death. She was also keenly aware of the people she didn't hear from. Be gentle with your loved ones if these annual greetings are an important tradition of theirs. If possible, ask family members and friends to contribute cards, photographs or drawings to help keep the senior's seasonal mail more upbeat. My mom needed this connection with her life-long friends, so I helped her write her own outgoing cards each year as well.
4. Help your loved one see that you are trying to simplify your holiday plans to focus on the real meaning of these celebrations. Let them know you are trying to ignore the increasing hype over food, gifts, decorations and parties in order to focus on the people and values you cherish. Remind them that they have taught you the importance of family and friendship and thank them for that.
5. If a senior is in a long-term care facility, check with the activities director and local schools or extracurricular programs to see if they can arrange for children to do virtual or distanced visits with or performances for the residents. New activities and interactions with younger generations can be very uplifting for elders who are in physical or emotional pain. Visiting pet therapy is another source of entertainment and socialization that can bring joy to seniors whose social lives have been significantly impacted by COVID-19.

6. Check with your loved one's religious organization to see if they can offer extra social and/or spiritual support. For example, the [Stephen Ministry](#) is a program offered by many Christian churches that provides one-on-one support to those who are having difficulties in life. Many houses of worship can arrange for a congregant or leader to visit a senior in need, either in person or virtually. Just having someone to talk to can go a long way toward relieving depression.
7. Help them add festive touches to their home or room in the long-term care facility. Ensure that these items do not present a safety hazard and try to decorate in stages to prolong the fun and give them something to look forward to. Many seniors enjoy reflecting on past holidays as they unpack cherished decorations, so be sure to listen to their stories and ask about special pieces. If you can't be there in person, at least phone or video call while they're decking the halls. Some small, easy-to-use decorations in senior apartments include removable window clings, garland, and artificial wreaths or floral arrangements.
8. Cook traditional baked goods or treats with your loved one if it is safe to get together in person. If they reside in an assisted living facility or nursing home, bring familiar treats that represent your holiday customs for your elder to enjoy and share with their friends. Try to make their dining table festive, too, by offering to send themed decor, appropriate colors and seasonal flavors.
9. One year, I was able to use a small conference room at my parents' nursing home to host a New Year's Eve party for them and their friends. They absolutely loved it. Just be sure to follow [current CDC guidelines](#) for minimizing COVID-19 risk at holiday gatherings. If traditional holiday parties or gatherings can't be held in a safe way, call your elder's friends and/or family to see if they would be able to attend a virtual gathering instead. Keep in mind that it doesn't necessarily have to be on a particular holiday. Realizing that the people they care about dialed in to spend time with them is priceless for an elder. Consider keeping virtual get-togethers small for elders with dementia so they do not get confused or overwhelmed. Technology can be disorienting and too many participants may cause them to become frustrated.
10. The most important thing you can do with a senior to make them feel loved and included this season is to simply spend time with them in a safe way. Look at family photos, watch home videos or holiday movies, listen to seasonal music, or do crafts together. For some, these traditions may need to take place outside (weather permitting), via FaceTime or Zoom, or while you social distance and wear masks. Regardless of what you decide to do together, any time you can spare is a precious gift.

Coping With COVID-19 Concerns

Knowing how to juggle seniors and the holidays can be tough, especially as the coronavirus pandemic continues to be a concern. Although CDC researchers and mathematical forecasting models [project](#) that cases and deaths are likely to decline over the coming months, most of the country is still experiencing high [levels of community transmission](#). Vaccination remains the best method of reducing one's risk of contracting COVID-19 and preventing hospitalization and death. In addition to these health benefits, most fully vaccinated individuals are able to resume activities they did prior to the pandemic, such as traveling and gathering with family and friends. Keep in mind that additional precautions like masking and social distancing may still be required or recommended for certain individuals and in some settings.

Do what you can to help your aging loved one feel involved and get into the holiday spirit without stressing yourself beyond your limits or risking anyone's health. If you put too much on your plate, it is likely that neither you nor your loved ones will enjoy the festivities nearly as much. Remember that most families are still facing difficult holiday and travel decisions this year. Get creative, stay safe and remember that your best efforts are good enough. For more information and recommendations regarding personal and social activities during the coronavirus pandemic, visit [CDC.gov](#).

Best Books, Articles, and Podcasts for Seniors

If you want to dive into the positive changes this new year could bring, here are 25 books, articles, and podcasts. Focused on aging, happiness, and navigating the pandemic, we hope they will inspire you as we head into the hopeful unknown.

Books

Whether you're [aging in place](#), [planning to retire](#), or moving to a [senior living community](#), entering new stages of life comes with many challenges and opportunities in our golden years. The following books can help you navigate those changes and embrace all that they have to offer.

[*Lessons from Lucy: The Simple Joys of an Old, Happy Dog*](#) 2020

Dave Barry

Pulitzer-prize winning columnist and humorist Dave Barry will inspire you to live joyously in old age while making you laugh all the way through this book. As Dave turns 70, he realizes his dog Lucy is dealing better with growing old than he is and sets out to discover why.

[*Keep it Moving: Lessons for the Rest of Your Life*](#) 2019

Twyla Tharp

Bestselling author and famous choreographer Twyla Tharp combines personal stories with a sort of “how-to” book on aging well. She shares lessons on finding purpose and growth as you get older.

[*Why Did I Come Into This Room?*](#) 2020

Joan Lunden

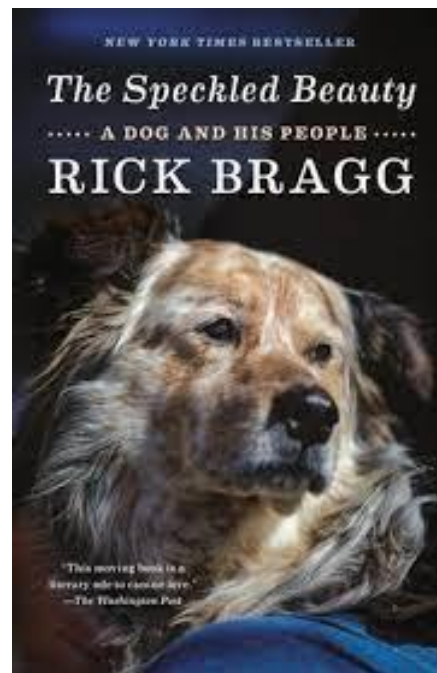
Billed as a “candid conversation about aging,” the former Good Morning America host shares how she has been coping with aging through often hilarious personal experiences. She discusses the emotional and physical aspects of aging while helping readers find joy and purpose.

[*Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*](#) 2017

Hector Garcia, Francesc Miralles

This book explores the idea that everyone has an ikigai, meaning reason for living, and explores how finding it leads to a long and happy life. Through

interviews with people on the Japanese island known for its long life expectancy, the authors give you tools to find your own ikigai and greater happiness.



[*Growing Old: Notes on Aging with Something Like Grace*](#) 2020

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

Both a memoir and a look at how seniors are treated in society, *Growing Old* takes on a range of issues related to getting older. With charm and wit, this book will help you embrace aging.

[*The Beauty of Living Twice*](#) 2021

Sharon Stone

This new book by Sharon Stone is a personal account of how the actress had to rebuild her life after a devastating stroke. Hailed as “a book for the wounded,” it is a candid and inspiring call to activism that proves it is never too late.

[*This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*](#) 2020

Ashton Applewhite

Ashton Applewhite is an author, activist, and TED speaker. In this book, she calls for an end to discrimination based on age. She debunks myths about older adults and takes a hard look at ageism and why it is so prevalent in our society.