

# Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness Through Occupational Engagement

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## Background:

- Efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 through stay-at-home orders, quarantine, and systemic social distancing recommendations have exacerbated the already severe problems of social isolation, loneliness and reduced engagement in meaningful activities among older adults.
- Social isolation, loneliness, and sedentary behavior have been shown to have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing.
- Occupational therapy as a profession recognizes these issues and strives to assess loneliness and social isolation and increase engagement in meaningful occupations (i.e., activities) to address these concerns and support individuals in productive aging in place.

## Occupational Therapy's Role

- Occupational therapists address all aspects of aging, from wellness strategies to rehabilitation and recovery by focusing on function and keeping older adults safe and independent in the activities that bring meaning to their lives.
- Occupational therapists seek to understand who the person is; what occupations the person wants, needs, and is expected to do; and where the person does these activities.

## Occupational Experience Profile

- The occupational experience profile (OEP) is an occupation-focused time-use diary designed to help individuals become aware of what they are currently doing and experiencing in everyday life and how those daily activities and experiences impact health and wellbeing.

By initiating an honest discussion about the personal meanings associated with daily routines, we can work to support older adults to engage in occupations that provide meaningful levels of pleasure, productivity, restoration, and social connectedness to combat social isolation and loneliness and improve health and wellness.



## Using the Occupational Experience Profile

- The OEP framework can be used to initiate a discussion about the personal meanings associated with daily activities and help older adults identify activities that bring pleasure, make them feel productive, provide restoration of energy to the body or soul, or involve some form of social connection.
- By recording and honestly reflecting on current routines, habits, and roles, older adults can better identify meaningful activities that contribute to their experience of pleasure (enjoying and non-enjoyment), productivity (accomplishment and non-accomplishment), restoration (energy renewal and energy drain), and social connectedness (connection and disconnection).
- Evidence suggests that using a framework such as the OEP to engage in a dialogue with older adults can improve physical and mental health and overall quality of life by increasing meaningful engagement.

## Discuss Daily Routines

- Ask specific and direct questions about routines
- By initiating an honest discussion about daily routines, we can all help older adults identify ways to promote social connection and participate in meaningful activities despite the pandemic
- We must recognize that even after the significant restrictions are lifted, older adults may still be faced with social isolation and lack access to meaningful activities.

## Increase Occupational Engagement

- Consider working with an occupational therapist to help identify safe and adapted solutions to increasing occupational engagement.
- Identify concrete activities that the older adult can participate in that will provide a sense of pleasure, productivity, restoration, or social connection, depending on what is lacking in their current routine – consider meaningful activities that can safely be done at or around their home until it is safe to return to the community.
- Provide training on the use of technology to maintain social connections virtually.
- Provide community resources for services available during the pandemic, such as safe transportation, home delivery services, virtual medical services, fall prevention, etc.