

***Tackling loneliness and social isolation amongst older people has long been a talking point in the later living sector, but as we navigate unprecedented times, how we communicate and engage with others is more important than ever. Looking to the future, MD of Morgan Sindall Later Living, Laurence Basturkmen discusses why we could be set for a tech shake-up in purpose-built supported living for the elderly...***

As the impact of COVID-19 continues to grip the nation, we have all had to adjust to new ways of living, working and communicating. Everyone will have been affected in different ways, but with older people being advised to take even more stringent precautions, for many, this will have impacted their social connections and risks leaving people feeling lonely.

According to a 2019 Age UK report, there are nearly 12 million people aged 65 and above in the UK, of which three million are over 75 and living alone. The impact of this cannot be underestimated, loneliness is a bigger problem than simply an emotional experience. Research shows that loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health; lacking social connections is as comparable a risk factor for early death as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is worse for us than well known risk factors such as obesity and physical inactivity. So, at a time when isolation is the only choice, how do we tackle loneliness amongst the most vulnerable members of our society?

Many of us have turned to technology in our hour of need, using messaging services, video conferencing apps and social media to keep in touch with family, friends and colleagues. Like all aspects of life, technology is continually revolutionising the health and care sector and under the backdrop of the current pandemic, we have seen more services embrace new ways of working, from the increase in virtual GP consultations, to the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) robots in hospitals in China.

Although we don't expect to see robots completely taking over anytime soon, the current circumstances that we find ourselves in has got many of us in the care sector wondering how supported living environments can embrace technology to help tackle loneliness. It is important that as an organisation, we educate about the causes of social isolation in the elderly and how we can introduce social connectivity into our future recommendations and planning. We are already seeing more older people being encouraged to get online. Even businesses such as Facebook are supporting the cause and supplying up to 2,050 of its Portal video-calling devices for free to hospitals, care homes and other settings so that isolated individuals can still communicate with loved ones.

### **What does the future hold?**

Although turning to technology seems to be the obvious answer for tackling social isolation when personal interactions need to be kept to a minimum, at the moment, it isn't as straight forward as that. Firstly, we need to take it back to basics and get the infrastructure in place to enable more older people in care and extra care environments to access a high-speed internet connection. Facilities need to be geared up for all residents to receive a quality Wi-Fi connection so that tech-savvy seniors can stay connected. Of course, this is a longer-term solution, but one that needs addressing. Hopefully, we will not face another pandemic again in our lifetimes, but this one has caught a lot of people off guard, meaning that many older people are facing reduced social interactions without the benefits of technology.

Once we start getting back to normal and able to socially interact again, will we see more on-site training workshops in communal spaces at extra care facilities to help older people become more familiar with technology? Will tablets instead of phones be fitted in rooms as standard? We'd like to think that the importance of these skills and tools is now evident and something to be prioritised for the future.

However, it's not just technology for communication that could be pushed to the fore, innovations to support wider health and wellbeing could start to become the norm. We have already seen advancements in technologies to aid

people around their homes and detect falls, but are we about to see even more health enhancing technologies come through?

One of the positive outcomes from the pandemic is that it is driving innovation in this sector. We are all having to think of new ways of working to ensure that our older people remain safe. Early on in the lockdown, the government launched [TechForce19](#), an initiative to provide funding for innovations that could support the elderly, vulnerable and self-isolating during COVID-19 and 18 businesses have now been selected. Several of these businesses have technologies specifically targeted at keeping older people physically and mentally healthy through the use of apps and sensors. How these new technologies are adopted in the long-term is yet to be seen but I believe the sector is on the cusp of widespread change and this is only the beginning.

**ENDS**

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