

MEDFORD TRANSCRIPT

Older adults feel isolating effects of holidays upended by COVID

Families weigh isolation of seniors against risks of COVID

Lara Salahi

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The persisting coronavirus pandemic will upend many traditional family gatherings this holiday season, and no group may be feeling the ripple effects of forgoing traditions more than older adults.

Adults ages 65 and older are at highest risk of dying from COVID-19, and among those most likely to feel alone and socially isolated amid the pandemic. Add in the thought of having to spend the holidays alone, and the effect on many older adults can be devastating.

As the holidays approach, families limited to smaller gatherings may be deciding which members outside of the household, if any, to include in their modified tradition. And, the earlier elders know what to expect during the holiday season, the better, according to Dr. Kathryn Zioto, medical director of Community Counseling Services at MelroseWakefield Healthcare.

“We all want to gather as a group, but there’s a very real risk,” Zioto said. “It’s a difficult situation, but it’s a conversation that we all need to have.”

Transparency in the holiday planning process can be an important part of maintaining older family members’ emotional wellbeing, she said.

David Marshak’s in-laws have had to make that decision recently. They typically host a large Thanksgiving dinner in their Northampton home. Marshak, his wife and 19-month-old son still plan to attend this year, but according to Marshak, the decision came naturally to exclude extended family members from this year’s gathering.

“They started talking about the challenges a while ago,” said Marshak. “It wasn’t a big announcement, but something we’ve been thinking about for a while.”

Marshak and his family plan to move to Cape Cod from Washington, D.C., in January. Marshak's 71-year-old father-in-law was diagnosed with prostate cancer in February.

"They take precautions when they're out, but with family, they want us to just all be together. They want to live their life," said Marshak.

Marshak says they adhere to the state's travel orders and have previously gotten tested before visiting to ensure they're not placing their aging in-laws at risk.

"When we think of risk, we think there are certain parts of life where it's important. For us, getting together is important," he said.

But when Marshak's mother-in-law's sister was diagnosed with breast cancer recently, the decision to forgo the larger gathering became more apparent to all family members.

"[My in-laws] didn't need to tell anyone. She approached my in-laws," he said. "This extended family is lucky."

Still, it didn't take away that sense of a tradition lost this year.

"It took some time to really sink in," said Marshak. "The thought that they couldn't [host] was sad for them."

Unlike Marshak's family, not all may be in agreement about how to handle family gatherings.

"It's really not a time to sway other family members to have the same perspective that you have," said Zioto. "If the holidays are about love and gathering and connections, it's time to show understanding of differing opinions without trying to challenge them."

The decision can be even more painstaking for elders living in assisted living or nursing homes where the choice to join outside family members can affect more than just those at the gathering.

"When deciding whether to include your loved one in a holiday gathering, it is important to take into account both the health and safety of your loved one, as well as the health and safety of your loved one's roommates, other people living on their floor or in their home, and the staff that care for them," Marylou Sudders, Secretary of Health and Human Services for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, said in a written statement.

Indeed, nursing home residents comprise over 40% of COVID-19 deaths across the nation. While public health experts recommend a 24-hour turnaround for coronavirus test results to

prevent COVID-19 outbreaks in nursing homes, fewer than 17% of nursing homes nationwide report receiving test results within a day, according to a study published in October in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Some places, like the Brookhouse Home in Salem, are offering alternative holiday programs to increase socialization and keep their residents safe.

“It’s been extremely difficult,” said Judy Kane, administrator at the women’s rest home. “Our residents have not left our grounds, except for critical appointments, for almost nine months.”

The residents most affected are those that always had children and grandchildren visit, according to Kane.

Norma Sawyer, 78, whose been a resident at the Brookhouse Home for four years, is among those who will forgo gathering with her three children and handful of grandchildren and great grandchildren this year.

“Sometimes I get a little sad,” Sawyer said. “It’s difficult.”

Residents at the Brookhouse Home will not be allowed to leave for the holidays. Instead, the home is planning socially distanced dinners and activities.

“A lot of staff will be coming in, which doesn’t typically happen, but we’re their family these days,” said Kane. “We are committed to making the holidays special for them.”

A limited number of visitors will be permitted on the days before and after the designated holiday, said Kane. And, Sawyer said, her three children will be among them.

According to Zioto, there are more ways for family members to “feel emotionally included” than by physical gatherings.

“Holidays aren’t just about the big family meal,” said Zioto.

Pamela Kelly, director of Elder Affairs for the Medford Council on Aging, agreed. For years, the Medford Senior Center has served as holiday meals for more than 150 older adults who may otherwise be alone for the occasion. This year, the Council has cancelled their annual Thanksgiving party and opted for take-home treat bags.

Kelly said the focus is on keeping those living independently from feeling lonely amid an already difficult year.

“We’re trying to stay positive,” said Kelly. “We do have our social worker and we have other resources available so if somebody is really feeling down, they can contact the appropriate person to help lift their spirits.”

The Council has partnered with nearby colleges on a program where students call seniors in the community to have a conversation.

“Sometimes hearing a friendly smiling voice on the other end can lift them up as well,” said Kelly.

Zioto recommends that family members also consider calling their loved one more frequently. If visits are allowed, Zioto suggests bringing familiar decorations, pictures, or music to the place where the elder is living. Another option may be to drop off a traditional recipe prepared in a safe manner, so they can take part in a familiar taste of the holiday.

“Socialization is so important for elderly individuals, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be in-person interaction,” she said. “It could be emotional connection and even a sense of purpose.”

Sawyer, who's looking forward to adding four more great grandchildren to the family soon, says looking forward to the upcoming events keeps her going.

“I get all kinds of phone calls every day. My family is really good to me,” said Sawyer. “And they know that I’m safe here, and they’re grateful for that.”

Lara Salahi is assistant professor of journalism at Endicott College.

Madison Schulman contributed to this report.

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