

# Engaging LGBT Elders in Prevention Programs During COVID-19

According to SAGE, the oldest and largest advocacy group for LGBT Older Adults<sup>1-2</sup>:

## LGBT ELDERS and ISOLATION

- Twice as likely to live alone
- Twice as likely to be single
- 3 to 4 times less likely to have children
- Often estranged from families of origin
- In small and shrinking social networks

## LGBT ELDERS: HEALTH DISPARITIES

- Disability
- Depression, anxiety, mood disorders
- Alcohol and tobacco abuse
- HIV among gay men
- Cardiovascular disease and hypertension

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS: LGBT ELDERS

- Came of age at a time when there was great prejudice and violence against LGBT people
- Experienced very real, devastating social and functional consequences for being openly LGBT in their lifetime
- Medical label of “mental disorder” validated the prejudice (Homosexuality removed from DSM-III in 1973)
- Lifetime of fear of discovery, keeping quiet to survive may make elders less willing to be open about their identity
- Persistent stress of discrimination and hiding contributes to health disparities that accumulate over the lifespan

## “MATTERING” MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

A June 2020 research study<sup>3</sup> showed that Older Americans had higher physical and emotional wellness when they see their value reflected in media and political rhetoric. Those who were told they “matter” showed higher well-being than those who heard messages that their lives were “expendable”.

A 2015 study<sup>4</sup> on Mattering for midlife and older gay men found:

- Internalized gay ageism is associated with depressive symptoms
- A sense of “mattering” can offset health effects of internalized gay ageism.
- Internalized gay ageism is a unique, underexplored form of minority stress.

## “THE MATTERING RECIPE”<sup>5</sup>

- Getting involved and staying engaged
- Harnessing the power of invitations
- Taking initiative
- Doing your best to make others feel like they matter

## COMPONENTS OF MATTERING<sup>5</sup>

- Sense that other people depend on us
- Perception that other people consider us to be important to them
- Understanding that other people are actively paying attention to us
- Other people have expressed that they would miss us if we were gone
- Feeling appreciated by someone

<sup>1</sup> Choi, S. K., & Meyer, I. H. (2016). *LGBT aging: A review of research findings, needs, and policy implications*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute. Report in partnership with Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE). [Available online.](#)  
<sup>2</sup> Movement Advancement Project and SAGE. (2017). *Understanding issues facing LGBT older adults*. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>3</sup> Flett, G. L., & Heisel, M. J. (2020). Aging and feeling valued versus expendable during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond: A review and commentary of why mattering is fundamental to the health and well-being of older adults. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction*. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>4</sup> Wight, R. G., LeBlanc, A. J., Meyer, I. H., & Harig, F. A. (2015). Internalized gay ageism, mattering, and depressive symptoms among midlife and older gay-identified men. *Social Science & Medicine*, 147, 200–208. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>5</sup> Schlossberg, N. K. (2009). *Revitalizing retirement: Reshaping your identity, relationships, and purpose*. American Psychological Association. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>6</sup> Pittaro, M. (2020). *Crisis fatigue and the COVID-19 pandemic: The reason why you are feeling emotionally overwhelmed*. Psychology Today. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>7</sup> Galligher, A. (2020). *How to cope with 'crisis fatigue'*. STAR Trauma Recovery Center at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>8</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). *Warning signs and risk factors for emotional distress*. [Available online.](#)  
<sup>9</sup> Anderson, M. (2017). *Tech adoption climbs among older adults*. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. [Available online.](#)



In a large-scale disaster like a global pandemic, researchers have identified four stages of crisis response<sup>6-7</sup>:

1. **Heroic Stage** – Band together in a collective surge of cortisol and adrenaline
2. **Honeymoon Stage** – Initial success and feel-good response to being part of a community.
3. **Disillusionment Stage** – Physically and emotionally exhausted. Extremely high allostatic load (hormonal overload). Hyper-vigilance, irritation, rage, despair.
4. **Fatigue Stage** – Pessimism and meaninglessness. Jumpy agitation or withdraw.
  - Vulnerable people are most likely to engage in risky behaviors at fatigue stage

## CRISIS FATIGUE: WARNING SIGNS<sup>8</sup>

- Crying spells or bursts of anger
- Difficulty eating
- Feeling guilty, helpless, or hopeless
- Increasing physical distress symptoms such as headaches or stomach pains
- Fatigue
- Losing interest in daily activities
- Avoiding family and friends

## INNOVATIVE INVOLVEMENT IDEAS

- Mentorship partners -- Research shows that LGBT Elders are twice as likely to see themselves as mentors than other seniors
- Busy Box care packages
- Progressive/Round-Robin letter
- Pen pals – LGBTQ inmates or refugees
- Social/Political advocacy
- Postcard tag
- Pandemic time capsule
- Virtual fashion show/costume contest
- Buddy circle phone tree
- Adopt-a-Grandparent
- Intergenerational Tech Lessons
- Group art installation

## REMEMBER INTERNET-FREE CONNECTIONS!

Most effective way to communicate with many Elders:

- Pick up the phone and call
- Send a text
- Send a letter or card
- Drive by visits

## SENIORS and TECHNOLOGY<sup>9</sup>

Before the pandemic:

- 41% of seniors did not have home internet access
- 4 in 10 elders owned a smartphone
- 1/3 of elders used social media
- Tech use is especially limited among those ages 75 and over
- Most seniors say they need help using new electronic devices
- Varies greatly by income and education

## GETTING ONLINE: ASSISTANCE FOR ELDERS

Senior Planet's *Stuck at Home Guide: How to Get Online*  
<https://seniorplanet.org/stuck-at-home-guide-get-online/>

Generations Online's free app designed for older adults that teaches how to swipe, tap, zoom, download apps  
<https://www.generationsonline.com/>

Free one-on-one assistance through IMSilver  
<https://imsilver.imda.gov.sg/get-one-on-one-assistance/virtual-digital-clinics/>

SAGE Elder Hotline: 877-360-LGBT (5428)

<sup>10</sup> Choi, S. K., & Meyer, I. H. (2016). *LGBT aging: A review of research findings, needs, and policy implications*. Los Angeles: The Williams Institute. Report in partnership with Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE). [Available online.](#)

<sup>11</sup> Movement Advancement Project and SAGE. (2017). *Understanding issues facing LGBT older adults*. [Available online.](#)

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