

Senior Citizens Suffered During the Pandemic: How we can Support their Wellbeing through Access to Physical Activities

An article published in September of this year investigates the relationships between the COVID-19 pandemic, social activities, and resulting wellness in senior citizens who were active pickle ball participants, and findings raise questions about how to ensure that our senior community members can keep safe and connected with access to spaces for physical activity.



Seniors benefit from activity and social connection, both of which the COVID-19 pandemic made difficult (Photo/Shutterstock).

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With the limitations that accompanied the pandemic, social connectivity, physical activity, and mental health of seniors declined. Researchers conducted a survey on 36 pickle-ball-playing seniors in the beginning of 2020 and then later in the same year, effectively before and after people had experienced side effects of the pandemic. As regular activities decreased, so did the mental health of the participants, as their loneliness and life satisfaction decreased. These findings provide insight into the importance of social programming for the wellbeing of seniors in our communities.

The article from the *World Leisure Journal* establishes that “COVID-19 and the related restrictions have impacted seniors’ physical activity, social connections, and psychological well-being.” Findings from the research in this study highlight worrying insight, as 88.89% of participants “socializing less and no participants report[ing] socializing more.”

While this study only had 36 participants, these numbers are significant as such a majority reported of themselves that socialization had decreased, and not a single participant stated the opposite. Even though no participants reported a significant difference in their physical health, they did report “significantly lower mental health, higher loneliness, and lower life satisfaction” as their socialization decreased.

These occurrences ultimately boil down to the fact that, physical health anxiety aside, the pandemic of the last year and half and the plentiful restrictions that accompanied it harmed seniors’ social lives, but more importantly, their mental health took a major hit. As mental health becomes a concept addressed much more openly across society, it is important to identify factors that prove to be harmful as well as how such negative impacts can be avoided.

Melia Stevenson is from Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, where she is the head of a program for the senior citizens of her community. Her “Engage” program continued through the pandemic, but it looked much different from the previous programming. In pre-2020 times, Engage had at least one event every week day, some examples of these being cards, hikes, crafts, bingo, bike rides, presentations on other places and cultures, and less commonly seen events such as ziplining, martini-making class, and even a coach trip to Branson, Missouri.

When lockdown first set in during March of 2020, all activities immediately ceased. Even without the scientific basis provided by studies such as the one of the article “An examination of pickleball participation, social connections, and psychological well-being among seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic,” Stevenson knew not to take being laid off from her job as a final answer. “I just felt that our seniors, more than ever, needed ways to engage with each other and to stay busy,” she states. Stevenson was able to continue programming through online video-calling platform Zoom as well as through expanding outdoor opportunities for members of her group to stay involved.

Both the content of Casper, Bocarro, and Lothary’s article and Melia Stevenson’s experience with her Engage program bring into question: What are our communities doing to ensure that our senior community members can keep safe and connected with access to spaces for physical activity?

We as a nation are not yet in the clear of the COVID-19 virus, and, as the article states, “the threat of future pandemics increases,” it is important that resources are established now to ensure that seniors will have safe access to facilities for social and physical exercise. Amenities like shuffleboard courts, walking and biking trails, and of course, pickleball courts, can be game changers in the field of maintaining the mental health of seniors. The article also cites how data collected during the pandemic specifically in retirement communities shows that “safe outdoor leisure experiences such as walking or virtual physical activity opportunities such as a virtual walking challenge” helped seniors stay social despite the loss of their regular activity programming.

Melia Stevenson’s experience moving her seniors online and outside is not representative of the course of action pursued by many communities. Learning from this science and applying the ideas of Stevenson for future inhibitors of social connectivity for seniors can play a significant

role in the future mental health and wellbeing of seniors. Implore local community centers and senior centers to make such plans now, rather than when it may be too late.

In both physical and social contexts, remember that, for our seniors, “if you don’t move it, you lose it!”