# Mentally Healthy Living after Social Distancing in Later Life: A National Snapshot

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## Objectives

Older Canadians' heightened risk for the physical harms of COVID-19[1,2] could make their return to a world without social distancing especially anxiety provoking. When public health restrictions were lifting in the Summer of 2022, we asked Canadians 60+ years of age: (1) How would you rate your anxiety? (2) Which mentally healthy living strategies are you using to manage it? Thus the aim was to identify anxiety-related strategies of significance.

## Methods

Data were collected in a national e-survey (June-August 2022). Our sample of community-dwelling older persons (N = 1,327) was stratified by age, sex, and education to approximate the Canadian population.[3] The short lay-friendly GAS-10[4] ($\alpha$ = .747) and a mentally healthy coping strategies checklist[5] were adopted to minimize responder burden and maximize participation.

## Results

Older Canadians' anxiety was between minimal and mild (mean GAS-10 score = 6.47/30). Similar proportions had no anxiety (20.6%, $n$ = 273) and severe anxiety (21.1%, $n$ = 280).

All 16 coping strategies in the checklist were put use across our studied sample. At least three-quarters of them accepted that some anxiety and fear was normal, were kind to themselves, dealt with problems in a structured way, took breathers from COVID-19 news, got proper rest/sleep, and remembered that they were resilient. Less than half of responders sought credible information about COVID-19 or sought support from loved ones. The least popular strategies were practicing relaxation and meditation ($n$ = 503; 38.7%) and unplugging from electronic devices ($n$ = 281; 21.6%).

A multivariate regression analysis ($F$=18.84, $df$=24, $p$<.001) explained 26.8% of the variance in responders' anxiety symptoms.

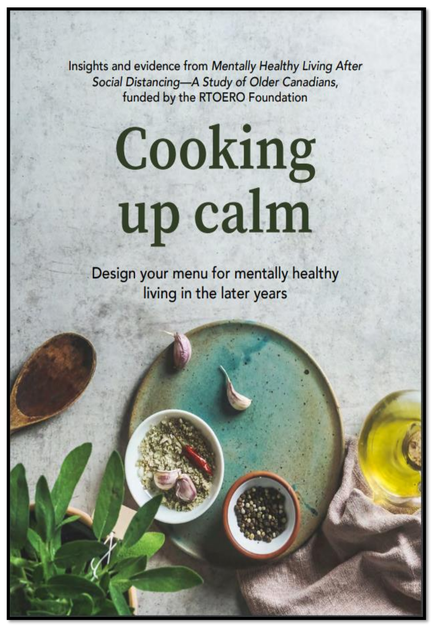
1 **Feeling restless, keyed up, or on edge** (symptom 6)

2 **Muscle tension** (symptom 8)

3 **Feeling of having no control over life** (symptom 9)

## Conclusion

Older Canadians managed age-related anxiety as social distancing lifted using a wide variety of coping strategies. There is much stigma surrounding mental health, shared learning and support from and for older people is thus essential for a mentally healthy recovery.[6,7] This past August, older Canadians' wisdom was shared in a novel cookbook format.[8] *'Cooking up Calm'* could help them and their contemporaries feel part of a larger community of recovery.[9]




| Significant Findings (reference group) | B, b, 95% CI |
|---|---|
| 65-69 years of age **(60-64 years of age)** | -.959[a], -.063, -1.929-.140 |
| 70-74 years of age | -1.521, -.091, -2.528 to -.501 |
| 75-79 year of age | -2.425,-.106, -3.502 to -1.139 |
| 80-84 years of age | -2.793, -.128, -3,907 to -1.493 |
| 85+ years of age | -3.399, -.100, -4.772 to -2.031 |
| Sex-at-birth is male | -1.129, -.084, -1.884 to -.428 |
| Good Health **(poor to fair health)** | -2.945, -.218, -3.808 to -2.032 |
| Very Good to Excellent Health | -3.664, -.229, -4.588 to -2.652 |
| I accepted that some anxiety/fear is normal **(responded 'no')** | 1.975, .089, .780 to 3.213 |
| I dealt with problems in a structured way | -2.109, -.128, -3.107 to -1.124 |
| I remembered that I am resilient and was careful with the "what ifs" | -1.167, -.074, -2.184 to -.154 |
| I challenged anxious worries and thoughts | 2.391, .169, 1.569 to 3.265 |
| I decreased other sources of stress in my life | -1.194, -.087, -1.978 to -.470 |
| I practiced meditation and relaxation | 1.862, .135, 1.115 to 2.60 |
| I ate healthy | -1.522, -.099, -2.445 to -.563 |
| I got proper rest and sleep | -1.446, -.089, -2.351 to -.492 |
| I stayed active | -2.307, -.156, -3.325 to -1.391 |

**Note:** *$\alpha$=Internal consistency reliability; B=Unstandardized regression coefficient; b=Standardized regression coefficient ; CI=Confidence interval.*

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Our 1-2-3 Network Analysis (of GAS-10 symptom 6, 8, and 9) manuscript is currently being developed.

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