

After Social Distancing Advice from Older Canadians for Older Canadians

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Objectives

Managing large-scale traumatic events is largely familiar territory for emergency response trained personnel, not everyday people.¹ Social isolation, such as through lockdowns and distancing directives², and a fear of catching COVID-19³, are risk factors for mental harm.⁴ One year into COVID-19, one-quarter of older Canadians found shopping for essentials frightening.³ When public health restrictions were lifting in the Summer of 2022, we solicited older Canadians’ advice about what contemporaries could do to be less socially isolated. We wanted evidence grounded in lay-person experience, with an emphasis on ‘wellness strategies’ during this recovery period of time.⁵

Methods

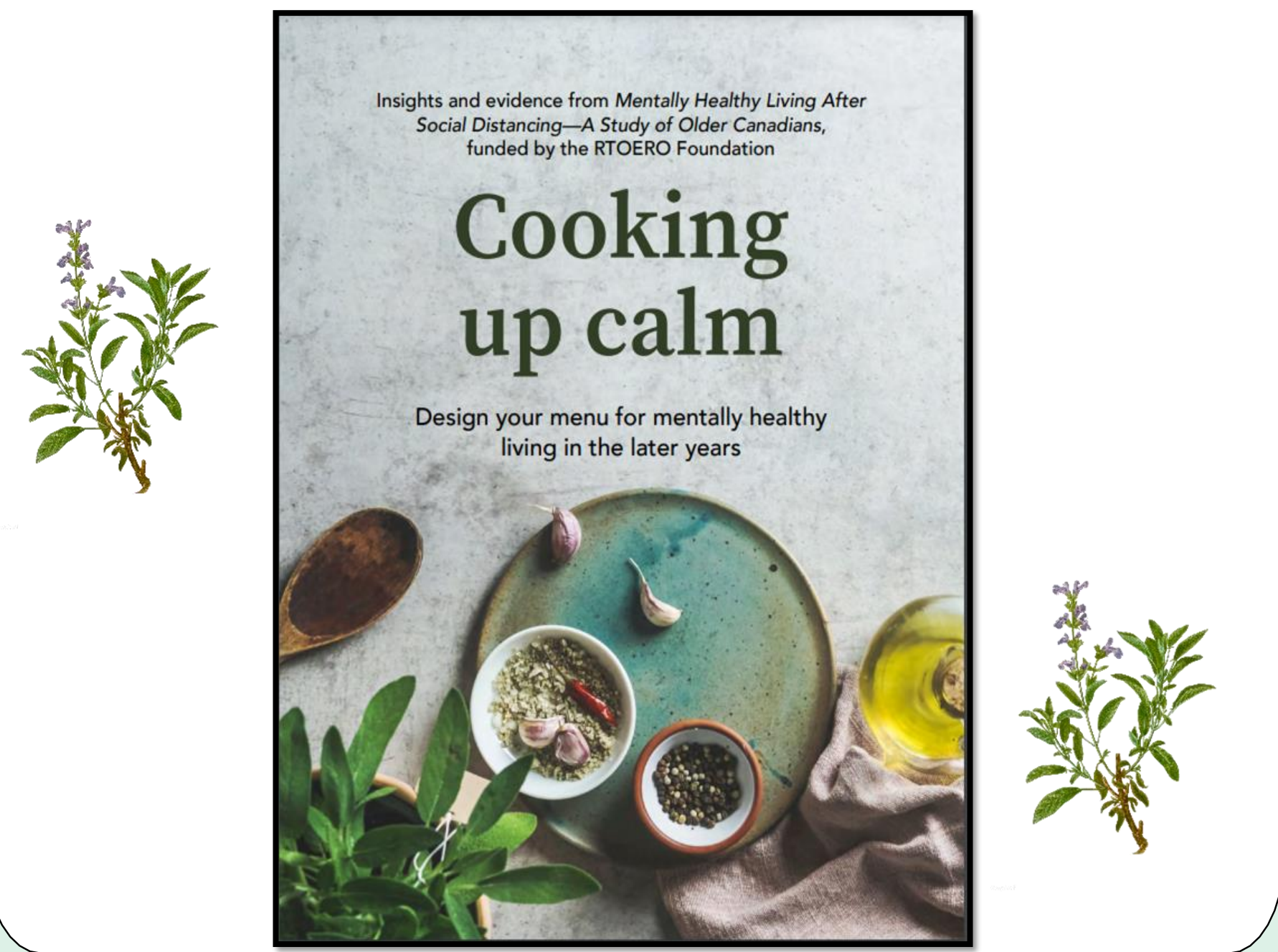
This study was part of a larger e-survey study about mentally healthy living among 1,327 community-dwelling persons 60+ years of age. A sample stratified by age, sex, and education to approximate the Canadian population was asked: **With COVID-19 public health measures lifting, based on your own experience, what would you suggest other older Canadians do to reduce social isolation?**

Advice from 1,212 responders was subjected to Content Analysis⁶ (NVIVO 1.7). With open-coding, commonly identified patterns of advice were grouped into a hierarchy of principal codes (themes) and subcodes (subthemes). Having consensus helped us to build a framework to interpret our findings.

Results/Findings:

A coding tree was developed as per the response received. Four main themes were identified:

1. Stay Engaged
2. Stay Positive
3. Stay Protected
4. Voiced Out Challenges.



Themes and Subthemes

1. Stay Engaged: How and with whom you can keep yourself connected with others, and how you can stay active, both physically and mentally

Social Engagement (n=778, 56.95%)

Stay connected with near and dear ones (friends and families)	"Attend[ing] more social activities but with social distancing" (William, Male, 70-74 years, Responder # 206)
Stay connected by virtual activities, home visits, family meetings, talking on the phone, WhatsApp....	"Join online activities and groups" (Maria, Female, 60-64 years, Responder # 1279)
Develop new connections with groups and institutions	"Get a hobby with like-minded age-appropriate people" (Joseph, Male, 60-64 years, Responder # 973)
Develop new connections by joining groups, involved with institutions, voluntary work, community services	"Make an effort to go outside and interact briefly outside with others" (Anna, Female, 60-64 years, Responder # 1269)

Physical/Mental Engagement (n=383, 28.89%)

Stay active by outdoor activities	"Going to the gym and walking" (David, Male, 75-79 years, Responder # 102)
Stay active by indoor activities	"Keep busy at home, enjoying what you have, that you worked your life for" (Jolene, Female, 65-69 years, Responder # 704)

2. Stay Positive: Ready yourself emotionally and mentally and make a conscious choice to do things to help you get back to pre-COVID routines.

Getting Ready (n=124, 10.19%)

Acceptance of reality	"Do not sweat over things that you have no control over" (Lucia, Female, 60-64 years, Responder # 808)
Integration of spirituality	"Relax and pray for the best" (River, Unknown, 70-74 years, Responder # 1320)
Being hopeful	"Remember that you are not alone" (Diana, Female, 60-64 years, Responder #853)

Conscious choices (n=233, 19.02%)

Self-care	"Look after yourself" (Marima, Female, 70-74 years, Responder #176)
Selection of social spaces	"Visit more, go for coffee dates, go on shopping excursions" (Bill, Male, 80-84 years, Responder # 157)
Learn new skills	"... continue to educate selves" (Karyn, Female, 65-69 years, Responder #1020)"

3. Stay Protected: Follow public health measures and use personal health measures.

Personal health protective/preventive measures (n=175, 14.25%)	"Wear a mask when in gatherings" (Dustin, Male, 80-84 years, Responder # 168)
Public health/Government measures (n=84, 6.68%)	"Become fully vaccinated" (Alexander, Male, 70-74 years, Responder #99)

4. Voiced Out Challenges

Pessimist advice (n=48, 3.99%)	"Don't listen to health administration, covid was and is a cold" (Eleanor, Female, 60-64 years, Responder #1119)
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Conclusions

Good health promotion information is borne by sound evidence and comes from those who have walked a mile in older Canadians’ shoes.^{5,7,8} Sage advice is a key ingredient for mentally healthy living. Such advice should be duly considered for future interventions, policy and programs to address everyday social isolation and future pandemics.⁹

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