



## Virtual Social Work Care with Older Black Adults: A Culturally Relevant Technology-Based Intervention to Reduce Social Isolation and Loneliness in a Time of Pandemic

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LETTER



## Virtual Social Work Care with Older Black Adults: A Culturally Relevant Technology-Based Intervention to Reduce Social Isolation and Loneliness in a Time of Pandemic

Dear Editor,

The Public Health Agency of Canada, a federal agency of the Government of Canada, does not collect race-based data on COVID-19. Some provincial jurisdictions have begun collecting this information. From the limited data available, evidence shows a strong correlation between COVID-19 cases and neighborhoods with a higher number of Black people (Bowden & Cain, 2020).

Older Black adults are at an increased risk for COVID-19 for a number of reasons: poor socioeconomic status; living in rural/remote, high-density, or substandard physical environments; and difficulty accessing health care services (Bowden & Cain, 2020). Experience with anti-Black racism is also known to put members of Black and racialized communities at risk for COVID-19. These factors influence the health and social care of older Black adults, particularly those who are immunocompromised or present with underlying medical conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, high blood pressure, and cancer.

In Canada, a clear disparity emerges in infection prevention and control measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on older Black adults, particularly those in rural or remote areas. Current measures for reducing the transmission of COVID-19 – including social distancing – do not take a racially and culturally informed approach to health and well-being. Racial stigma and privacy concerns may act as barriers to health care access for COVID-19 supportive care, and Black culture tends to prioritize collectivist over individualist values (Thabede, 2008) – multiple generations of family members may live in the same household. Family members who work in high-risk/low-wage jobs are at greater risk of contracting the disease, which can then spread to older family members.

Cultural institutions and places of worship are common sources of social support for older Black adults. In the context of COVID-19, connections fostered by these social networks are temporarily (or in the case of a death, permanently) severed. Older Black adults might experience feelings of isolation and loneliness due to public health measures that encourage social and physical distancing. Being isolated and lonely can exacerbate mental health

conditions including anxiety, depression, and a decline in cognitive function or dementia (Fakoya et al., 2020).

Older Black adults in rural or remote areas could benefit from culturally responsive social work interventions that promote coping skills and social connections in periods of a public health crisis. *Virtual Social Work Care with Older Black Adults* is one such intervention strategy. This approach to gerontological care draws on an African epistemological and ontological world view (Thabede, 2008). Central to the model is the participation of older Black adults in their own social care within the supportive context of a virtual community.

In the proposed intervention strategy, as in the traditional African practice of Ubuntu, individuals would see themselves as part of a collective whole. Older Black adults would have a central role in identifying their own and the group's needs, and determine with social workers the best possible solution for meeting those needs. Even at a distance, the interdependent relationship between older Black adults and social workers would depart from the traditional Eurocentric social work practice where the practitioner holds power, determines what the service user needs, and prescribes individualistic solutions.

Culturally grounded interventions could support older Black adults to make new virtual connections that could reduce their social isolation and loneliness. Food is an important center of social interaction in Black culture. With support from a social worker, a digital meal could be organized, to engage older Black adults in sharing about their food and exchanging recipes. The prepared meals would then be eaten separately, at a distance, but simultaneously.

Positive religious coping and spirituality can have a beneficial impact on mental health and well-being (Koenig, 2009). Social workers could encourage dialogue among older Black adults about their immediate and future pandemic concerns, taking their religious and spiritual beliefs into consideration. Social workers could also help older Black adults maintain or improve their mobility, through regular group exercises combining playing African drums and dancing.

Ethical and legal challenges need to be considered in such a technology-based social intervention. Social workers must have open discussions with older Black adults about confidentiality when using communication technologies (Van Sickle, 2017). A security checklist for social workers and older Black adults – comprising encrypted devices, secure internet connections, and compliance with data privacy policies and standards – might minimize security vulnerabilities.

While the COVID-19 global pandemic has caused significant stress for older Black adults, particularly those who are socially and economically disadvantaged, social workers can take practical steps to minimize the negative

consequences resulting from social and physical distancing measures. The holistic, virtual, and culturally sensitive intervention described here can help to reduce social isolation and loneliness as well as improve older Black adults' compliance with social and physical distancing guidelines.

Sincerely,

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