

The Area Agency on Aging & Disabilities of Southwest Washington's Caregiver Corner

Creating Virtual Family Caregiver Support Networks, by Barry J. Jacobs, Psy.D

Family caregivers hear the same lecture over and over: "You must stay connected to others or else you'll become isolated and depressed." But, even under the best conditions, it is never easy for caregivers to find time for socializing when they have so many daily tasks. Now, when even non-caregivers have become isolated because of their fears of infection, caregivers are struggling to figure out how they are supposed to juggle their responsibilities, reach out to others, and stay safe. In-person family get-togethers can seem risky. Wearing masks and keeping distance while meeting friends outdoors may seem like more trouble than it's worth.

To maintain their social connections, some caregivers have grown to love video chats. They use them to not just meet with others one-on-one, but to bring together groups of friends and family members. In that way, they hope to help everyone involved feel less isolated and better supported. Here are some of their ideas that you might consider trying:

Video dinner and a movie: Most of us have heard of virtual happy hours for which friends arrange a time to meet on a teleconferencing platform to drink their favorite cocktails together. Some take this idea further by asking them to decide on one recipe they'd all like to make and then have everyone eat their own prepared meal in their own homes while talking together on the video. It is even possible for them to end the video chat after dinner and then watch the same streaming movie as if they were going to the same movie theater together.

Video interest groups: Many book groups switched months ago from in-person to virtual events. The same is true for groups to practice speaking French, talk about sports or play musical instruments together. Many caregivers now have their caregiver support groups on video, too. It allows people to attend who might not otherwise be able to leave their care receivers at home and go to an in-person meeting.

Virtual sharing-and-caring groups: Some churches have long had in-person sharing-and-caring groups in which eight to 10 congregants meet monthly and take turns talking about whatever is bothering them. These groups now continue online, offering participants the same helpful kindness, encouragement, and ideas for coping during the pandemic that they always did with other life problems.

Daily video or telephone touches: Family caregivers don't always need hour-long group sessions to feel better. Sometimes all it takes is hearing a friendly, caring voice asking them how they are. Especially during the pandemic when more caregivers are cooped up at home, it is important for them to touch base with one another every day in any way they can. Video works great for that but so does the telephone. It is how we continue to remind one another we're there to support each other through these tough times.

Contact the Area Agency on Aging and Disabilities of Southwest Washington at 360-694-8144 or IAClark@dshs.wa.gov to learn more about supports available to family caregivers. Article content provided by Active Daily Living.