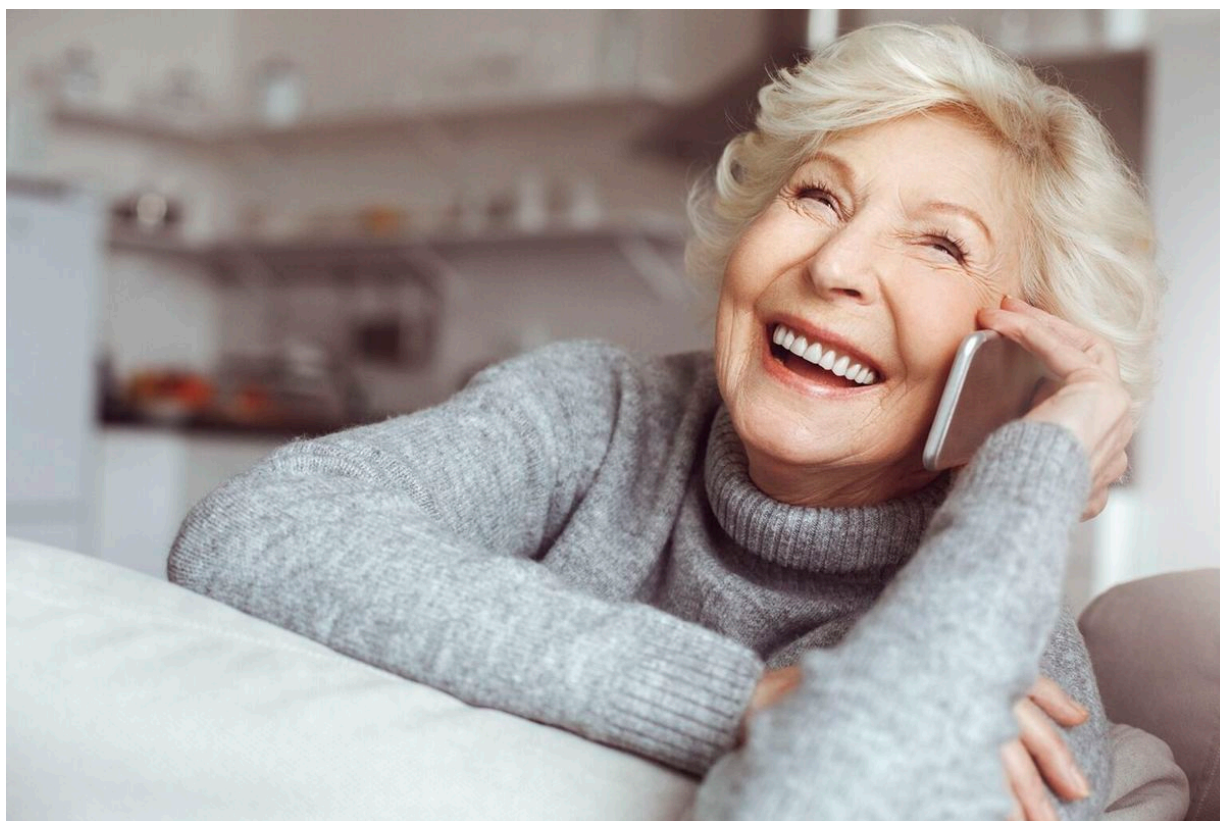


Older adults found resilience during pandemic through community, human connection, study finds

May 19, 2021



Older adults were significantly affected by isolation and stress during Oregon's initial COVID-19 lockdown last spring, but they were also able to find connection and meaning in community, new hobbies and time for themselves, a recent Oregon State University study found.

If resilience is understood as the ability to see positives in the midst of a negative situation, then many of the study's participants demonstrated resilience during that time, the researchers said.

"A lot of times we think about resilience as a personality trait, and it's true that there are some qualities that may help people experience that. But in the end, resilience is something that is shared," said Heidi Igarashi, first author on the study and a recent doctoral graduate of OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. "One of the things that came out in our study was the degree to which the people-connection was really significant."

The study, published in the *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, surveyed 235 adults ages 51 to 95 about their experiences from April 28-May 4, 2020, when Oregon's statewide stay-at-home order had been in place for about a month.

The online survey asked participants about recent and ongoing difficulties in their lives caused by COVID-19, as well as recent positive experiences.

People shared experiences at the personal, interpersonal and societal levels. Personal difficulties included the stress of constant vigilance around ensuring safety in everyday activities, as well as fear of death and uncertainty about the future. Interpersonal challenges included social isolation, lack of physical contact and fear for loved ones' health. Societal stressors were centered on lack of scientific leadership and concerns for the community at large.

While 94% of participants listed difficulties, roughly 63% shared positive experiences. At the personal level, these included things like trying new projects — gardening, cooking — and increased gratitude for the simpler, slower pace of life. Interpersonal joys were found in new friendships or reconnecting with old friends, and in people caring for one another. At the societal level, some noted the benefit to the environment from people driving less and the sense of increased community solidarity.

Older adults took comfort in seeing neighbors and friends taking care of each other, while simultaneously adding to community resilience by looking after friends and neighbors themselves and joining group efforts like mask-sewing drives, said co-author Carolyn Aldwin, the Jo Anne Leonard Endowed Director of the Center for Healthy Aging Research at OSU.

"It's a mistake to think of older adults as just being sort of victims during COVID," Aldwin said. "They're a lot more resilient than we think they are, and they're important for the community."

Many of the survey respondents engaged in Zoom calls with family and friends, enjoyed time spent in nature and finally finished projects that had been sitting in the closet or garage.

Retired folks had a harder time than those who are employed because the lockdown was more disruptive to their routine, including closing off regular volunteer opportunities because of older adults' high-risk status. But some respondents reported feeling relief at being able to focus on themselves for a change, with pursuits like meditation and journaling, rather than spending all their time caring for other people.

The study was conducted via internet survey, which affected response rates; the majority of participants were white, female, retired and highly educated, as opposed to the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups that have been hardest hit by COVID-19 infections and death, the researchers said.

But Aldwin cautions against assumptions about resilience among less-advantaged groups. While they may have experienced more loss and financial distress, a key factor in resilience is being able to find purpose in life, which can occur through helping others.

“There’s this meaning that’s found in caregiving, a reason for living, where our study group often didn’t have these demands on them, and they were feeling a lack of sense of meaning,” she said. “If you’re the person who’s holding the family together during this crisis, that’s a source of meaning. Clearly we would have seen more loss and more difficulty, but we also might have seen sources of resilience that we didn’t see in the study group.”