

Know Your Neighbor

For everyone, and especially for older adults, social distancing can increase loneliness. Even before COVID-19, loneliness was a growing issue being studied for its impacts on health and well-being. Research published by the National Institutes of Health has shown that loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26 percent. It also increases the incidence of depression, diabetes and suicide as well as clinical dementia by 64 percent.

Now is the time to safely reach out to older neighbors who may be at risk of isolation and loneliness to offer friendship and support. Texas Health and Human Services is launching the Know Your Neighbor campaignⁱ to encourage connection and engagement while remaining safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign encourages Texans to form and maintain new connections with older neighbors to help reduce the risks of isolation and loneliness while following social distancing recommendationsⁱⁱ.

Challenge yourself to Know Your Neighbor by following these five steps:

Step 1: Reach out. Identify a neighbor you would like to reach out to. Write your neighbor a note to introduce yourself. You can use the [Know Your Neighbor Template Note \(PDF\)](#) or write your own. Unleash your creative side and think of something that will brighten their day. Make sure to follow social distancing recommendations when dropping off your note.*

As you begin, keep these considerations in mind:

- Trust your instincts. If it does not feel right, then do not push it. You are not going to create new friendships with everyone, so be sure it is a good fit for both of you.
- Review your own attitudes around aging. Use this [Know Ageism \(PDF\)](#) resource for self-reflection.
- Respect other people's wishes. Some of your neighbors may not be interested in connecting.
- You and your neighbor should not share information you do not want to share (medical, financial or personal identity information).

Step 2: Invite. Include ways your neighbor can contact you (phone, email, video chat) and invite them to a virtual get together. Ideas on how to connect virtually using technology can be found on our [Being Informed and Staying Connected resource \(PDF\)](#).

You can do the following activities with limited technology while maintaining social distance:

- Make and send a card.
- Craft a homemade gift and mail it or drop it off on their doorstep.
- Exchange favorite recipes.
- Read the same book and discuss by phone.

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- Do a coloring book exchange by coloring portions or entire pages and sending it back and forth.
- Record a story using your phone and share it with your new friend or write a story and mail it.
- Grow a plant together by buying seeds for yourself and seeds to share.
- Enjoy a meal together by phone by having a contactless meal delivered to both of you.
- Call each other and watch a movie together for a virtual movie date.

Step 3: Engage. At the virtual get-together, use some of these Know Your Neighbor starter questions to spark conversation:

- Tell me about yourself.
- How long have you lived in this community?
- What are favorite restaurants?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What have you been doing with your time at home?
- Have you seen any good TV shows lately?
- What is your favorite book?
- What type of music do you like to listen to?
- If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live?

You can keep the first conversation short and plan to touch base again in a few days. This would also be a good time to revisit the activities listed in Step 2 to make plans.

Step 4: Assist. As you get to know your neighbor they might share their struggles and concerns. If the opportunity comes up, find out if your neighbor needs anything. If they do, these fact sheets might be helpful:

- [Be Informed \(PDF\)](#) has a list of resources by category. This is handy to have in case your neighbor brings up several concerns.
- [Nutrition Resources for Staying Healthy \(PDF\)](#) lists ways to get food assistance and nutrition information.
- [Be Healthy \(PDF\)](#) has tips and resources for staying healthy and active.

Step 5: Tell others. If you have a positive experience getting to know your neighbor, encourage others to do the same. Together we can make connections and reduce isolation. Here are some ways to get others involved:

- **Ask your local school** to send Know Your Neighbor campaign information to students' parents.
- **Involve your employer** by asking them to share Know Your Neighbor campaign information with employees. Many workplaces have a Human Resources office that can email information to employees.

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- [Use these template emails \(PDF\)](#) to help tell others about Know Your Neighbor.

You can also approach established organizations or facilities — like long-term care and assisted living facilities, faith communities and senior centers — to reach out to older adults in your area. Here are some tips:

- **Long-Term Care Facilities:** Connect and ask if there is a resident who would be interested in connecting virtually. The opportunities for connecting with residents are plentiful: Make signs to put on windows and doors, connect by phone or create a drive-by parade.
- **Faith Communities:** Reach out to a faith community and see if they have any older members that need additional support. Ask if they have a system to check in via phone with their older members and offer to help make calls.
- **Senior Centers:** Tell your local senior/community centers about the Know Your Neighbor campaign. Let them know you are interested in connecting with center participants, and discuss virtual connection options (e.g., phone call check-ins with center participants, leading a virtual or in-person fitness class or teaching an art class). Call 2-1-1 or visit 211texas.org to find your local senior/community centers.

*The HHSC Know Your Neighbor campaign encourages people and communities to build relationships with older neighbors. To protect everyone involved, it is important to follow local, state and national orders and recommendations about social distancing. The resources and tools available through the Know Your Neighbor campaign emphasize social connection while practicing safe social distancing. Participation in the Know Your Neighbor campaign is voluntary and, while activities provided follow social distancing recommendations and best practices, campaign participants are advised that they assume any risk associated with their participation.

ⁱ Inspired by <https://www.californiavolunteers.ca.gov/get-involved/covid-19/neighbor-check-ins/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/what-you-can-do.html>