“Getting me through the pandemic”: the importance of technology for older adults’ wellbeing during COVID-19

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Phase 2 - Methods

- A total of 95 qualitative interviews undertaken by telephone at five time points over 12 months starting May 2020
- All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed
- Interviews addressed daily life, relationships, activities, social connectedness, health, and other experiences during COVID-19
- Interview transcripts and researcher interview notes being analysed thematically using the software Nvivo
- Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant identities
20 participants took part in qualitative telephone interviews.

10 participants had received a high risk letter (Cohort 1) and 10 were not high risk (Cohort 2).

11 women and 9 men.

Age range 70-85 years (mean age 74.4 years).

7 participants lived alone, 13 lived with a partner/spouse.

Cohort 1 (high risk) illnesses included: COPD, heart failure, hypertension, Motor Neurone Disease and lung cancer.
‘Being able to just give them a hug, that’s one of the big – oh for goodness sake, **hurry up and let me be able to hug them** [...] we’re a very huggy [family] …’

(Elizabeth, C1, Int 5)

‘I miss seeing the grandchildren, they’re teenagers and they’re growing up so fast.’

(Cynthia, C2, Int 5)

‘I’ve not seen [my daughter] since Christmas 2019, so 18 months [...] we would have met up for Christmas and then sometimes we meet up for what we call birthday weekend [and go] down to stay.’

(Jill, C2, Int 5)
‘[My husband’s] dad was 93 and he did have a good life, but the end he had wasn’t that good [...] he was in hospital for months and we couldn’t go and see him.’
(Sarah, C2, Int 5)

‘It was very very difficult not being able to go and see [my son] when he was in ICU [...] even though he was unconscious, they’d take the phone to his ear and I could speak to him you know to stimulate him.’
(Sally, C1, Int 5)

‘Well [winter] wasn’t good. We were locked down again, I couldn’t see my husband again [in the nursing home], and you know everywhere was just like miserable, but we’ve come out of it [...] I can sit close to him and hold his hand now, whereas last Summer I was able to see him in the garden but at a six foot distance.’
(Julie, C2, Int 5)
‘Well the Winter lockdown was much worse than the Summer lockdown or the Autumn one. Because once it went dark that was it, you know, I didn’t see anybody at all [...] Really quite depressing I found it [...] and much more time to reflect [...] I had a glimpse of what it was like to be old and housebound and on my own.’

(Bridget, C2, Int 5)
‘Well I’m actually quite fit I think. My weight is coming down, I mean I was never overweight but I’m happier with my weight, I’m eating healthily, I’m certainly taking a lot of exercise [...] I’m feeling as fit as I ever have done you know within the limits of my age.’

(Joseph, C2, Int 3)
Interviewer: What stopped you from going [to the GP] do you think?
Participant: Well it was really the fact that there was a chance of catching the virus, I just wanted to delay as long as possible [...] but it got that bad I just had to phone for an ambulance.
(William, C1, Int 2)

‘[The pandemic] has made my ability to walk and things worse because I’ve stiffened up because I’m not doing the things that I would normally be doing and there’s only so much walking you can do in a flat.’
(Elizabeth, C1, Int 5)
‘Well the biggest impact [the pandemic has had] on my life was when I got that depression, because I always thought I was so strong willed, that I was the kind of person that anything that happened I could just shrug off and it would go and it wouldn’t bother me [...] I just couldn’t handle the fact that there seemed to be no way out of it and that’s what got me, it just got into the brain and kept churning over.’

(Charles, C2, Int 5)
‘…we talk to everyone on Zoom at the moment […] I’d never even heard of Zoom […] Talk about a sharp learning curve.’
(Joseph, C2, Int 5)

‘I’d never even heard of Zoom before COVID-19, now I’m using it all the time.’
(George, C1, Int 3)

‘I didn’t feel as if I needed to talk to anybody […] I had plenty of people to talk to as such [by phone] and Messenger, Facebook.’
(Anne, C1, Int 5)

‘I have had much more time to read and discovered some wonderful writers – made possible by having technologies like Kindle and the web at home.’
(Cynthia, C2, Int 5 follow-up email)
‘I think I grew closer to my children. Strange, this, as we could obviously see far less of each other. But I think we were more able than usual to communicate about hopes and fears …’
(Cynthia, C2, Int 5 follow-up email)

‘…perhaps 20 of us have been [meeting on Zoom] out of the choir of 45 and it’s worked up to a point but I don’t enjoy it particularly because you’re not getting together with people to sing, because you can’t sing together by Zoom because you’re all at different speeds on your internet and it’s impossible to coordinate the singing.’
(Edward, C2, Int5)

‘…we’ve been having a Zoom dinner party once a week for months, we’d all set the table properly and cook a proper meal and then eat it on Zoom talking to each other.’
(Julie, C2, Int 5)
‘[Using Zoom on Christmas day] one of the things we had was a pantomime which I had written [...] We also had just sort of intimate chats during the day when the children were asleep and I could talk to the girls and it just felt it was enough activity to keep us all engaged and enough down time so that you could reflect on what was happening and just chill in front of the telly.’

(Mary, C1, Int5)

‘I’ve been learning how to Zoom, oh yes, now it’s not always successful Sandra I have to tell you that but in the main it is, we have our Bible study on a Wednesday night which is done with Zoom and a week past Sunday I had read a story to the Sunday school [on Zoom].

(Elizabeth, C1, Int2)

‘Christmas was OK, I sent my son a box of presents and then on Christmas morning he phoned me whilst he opened his presents. I mean this lad is 51 years old you know [laughter]!’

(Frances, C1, Int 5)
‘I would feel a lot more happier if it wasn’t for this new variant [...] Every day I go onto my iPad and look at the figures and the hospital admissions have been going down and down and down and down, when I looked today they’ve gone up to 35, that’s just in one day.’

(Jennifer, C1, Int 5)

‘It gets more worrying as lockdown eases. Because you feel because you are allowed to do more you should be. I mean lockdown meant it was a kind of cocooning, do you know what I mean? Well there was no pressure on me to [do anything].’

(Joseph, C2, Int 2)
Conclusion

• Participants faced a number of challenges during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic
• The use of technologies was one way in which participants negotiated these challenges
• This included learning new skills – and learning these very quickly
• Participant were creative in the ways they adapted to life during this period of time
• These findings challenge the mainstream discourses of older adults during the pandemic
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