

# Exploring assisted-living older adults' experience and perceived psychosocial benefits of compassionate presence (CP) sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Background

- Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 24% of community-dwelling older Americans aged 65+ felt socially isolated and around 35% reported feeling lonely <sup>1</sup>
- Loneliness and isolation are even more common among older adults living in long-term care settings <sup>2</sup>
- The feeling of loneliness and isolation increase the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, depressed immune system, reduced cognitive function, sleep disturbance, depression, etc. <sup>3-8</sup>
- Research shows that many older adults in long-term care settings experience greater emotional and existential loneliness <sup>9-10</sup>
- The compassionate presence (CP) intervention may be a promising non-pharmacologic approach that could reduce emotional and existential loneliness and feeling of isolation among older adults.
- This pilot study explored the effectiveness of intergenerational compassionate presence sessions in reducing loneliness and isolation among assisted-living older adults during this pandemic.**

## Methods

### Design and Setting

- This study is an exploratory qualitative study.
- Twenty-two older adults residing in two assisted-living facilities located in the Twin Cities, participated in 10-week virtual CP sessions facilitated by college students.

### Training of Student Facilitators (SFs)

- Compassion can be influenced by training, <sup>11</sup> and when individuals are trained to explicitly listen to, attend to, and feel empathy with another, compassion levels increase. <sup>12</sup>
- We trained SFs on deep and active listening skills based on a toolkit we developed. See Table 1.

**Table 1:** Details of the CP training session

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Describe study rationale, goals, and objectives. Explain the concept of CP/listening. Discuss how to navigate ethical issues during a CP session. Discuss common misconceptions about aging and older adults. Explain program logistics. <b>Assessment:</b> Group discussion and written reflection	Analyze some CP scenarios. Explain the goal of facilitating a CP session. Practice facilitating individual CP session. Provide feedback on facilitation skills. <b>Assessment:</b> Group discussion, role play observation, team/peer feedback, and written reflection	Discuss how to handle group dynamics. Practice facilitating group CP session. Provide feedback on facilitation skills. Discuss basic troubleshooting techniques during a CP session. <b>Assessment:</b> Group discussion, role play observation, team/peer feedback, and written reflection

## Procedure

- Twenty-two participants consented to participate in the study and engaged in weekly group or individual virtual CP sessions. See Table 2.

**Table 2.** Type of intervention, delivery format, duration, and number of interactions

Group	Number of elders	Type of intervention	Delivery platform	Duration	Number of interactions
Site 1	10	Compassionate presence <b>group</b> session	Video	1 hour/week	10x/group
Site 2	12	Compassionate presence <b>individual</b> session	Video	1 hour/week	10x/individual

- During the CP sessions, the participants were given the space to freely express their thoughts and feelings without fear of being judged and with minimal interruptions. The intervention lasted for 10 weeks.

## Data Collection and Analysis

- Participants responded to semi-structured questions on their experience and perception of the CP sessions facilitated by college students post-intervention.
- Thematic analysis of the data was done based on the six steps described in Braun and Clarke <sup>13</sup>

## Results

- Two themes emerged from the data. The first theme represents participants' thoughts and feelings about their CP sessions and what they enjoyed sharing with student facilitators. See Table 3.

**Table 3.** CP Sessions' Experience Subthemes, Categories, and Sample Responses

Subtheme	Categories	Sample Responses
<b>Thoughts about session</b>	<i>Pleasant experience</i>	"She made me feel very much at home. I just poured out things I've never in my life talked about before."
	<i>Felt heard</i>	"It is good to know that someone is interested and listening to what you have to say. I felt I could say anything, and she was not the least bit judgmental."
<b>Feelings about session</b>	<i>Anticipation</i>	"I looked forward after the first visit, and I went home and thought about things and stuff, and the more I got to see her, the more I enjoyed looking forward to it."
<b>What older adults shared</b>	<i>Family</i>	"We had a lot of stories we told to each other, about family, where my family was at, how many grandchildren I had, and how many great-grandchildren I had. I had a good talk every week, and I really enjoyed all those weeks of talking to her."
	<i>Life experiences</i>	"I felt we had a deep connection. I knew what she was doing, she knew sort of my position, and I tried to explain to her what it is like being in a nursing home."

- The second theme describes how participants benefited from participating in the CP sessions with college students. See Table 4.

**Table 4.** CP Program Perceived Benefits Subthemes, Categories, and Sample Responses

Subtheme	Categories	Sample responses
<b>Emotional benefits</b>	<i>Decreased feeling of loneliness</i>	"It got me away from everything else. It gets lonely at times. I had someone I could talk to." "It allowed me to forget my loneliness and my depression because I got into their lives and what they do."
	<i>Improved mood</i>	"I feel much better. It gave me an outlet to explore, and that made me happy. You don't get that much of a chance to do that because of the pandemic."
	<i>Increased self-worth</i>	"All of a sudden, I blossomed in life. I just realized that I did amount to something all these years. I've never done anything like this before. It was an amazing experience."
<b>Social benefits</b>	<i>Decreased perceived isolation</i>	"I benefited, you know, it reduced that feeling that you are not alone in the world." "It means I can always reach out to somebody if I'm lonely. It made me feel good."
	<i>Created friendships</i>	"She became like a friend very quickly. I did not have any need to hold back on anything I said."
<b>Spiritual benefits</b>	<i>Enhanced sense of meaning in life</i>	"I kind of felt more important in life that I had something to offer that wasn't just my small little life in the grocery store."
	<i>Created opportunity to empty one's heart</i>	"Just to be able to talk about things that all my life I never talked, I never shared with the family."
<b>Mental health benefit</b>	<i>Improved memory</i>	"... it brought out more memories for me too." "It was interesting with what I came up with and what I enjoyed knowing and that I spoke as much as I did."

## Discussion

- Older adults described their experience using words like comfortable, nice, fun, interesting, good, enjoyed, satisfying, etc.
- Participants felt happy, relaxed, important, valued, and respected, which may have enhanced their sense of self-worth.
- Participants reported a decreased loneliness, isolation, and improved mood.
- The deep connections between the SFs and older adults seemed to enhance the older adults' sense of meaning in life, easing their loneliness and isolation during this pandemic.

## Conclusions

- The findings indicate that the intergenerational CP sessions were effective in improving the psychosocial health of assisted-living older adults during the pandemic.

## Limitations

- Underrepresentation of African American participants.
- Study is a pilot qualitative.

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