

# Researchers to study the effectiveness of an intervention for helping isolated older people during COVID-19

21 May 2020, by Alistair Keely



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Researchers are to trial an intervention aimed at preventing and mitigating the onset of depression and loneliness among the most vulnerable in society as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Enforced isolation, whether this is due to shielding or self-isolation, causes disruption to [daily routines](#), loss of social contact and [loneliness](#) which can lead to mental ill-health. Many more people will now be isolated as the lockdown continues for particular sections of society.

Isolation is likely to impact significantly on the mental health of vulnerable populations. Older people, and those with long-term conditions, represent a [high risk group](#), whose risk of [depression](#) is already increased by around a factor of 2-3 times.

## Intervention

The researchers have developed an intervention

delivered by trained support workers over the telephone, and over up to eight sessions.

The impact of this intervention will be evaluated to see if depression symptoms can be prevented or improved, during the time of lockdown, and whether the intervention is acceptable to [older adults](#) and to support workers.

Researchers will also evaluate whether this reduces levels of anxiety and feelings of loneliness.

## Depression

The trial is being led from York by Professor Simon Gilbody, Director of the Mental Health & Addictions Research Group (MHARG) at the University of York, and Professor David Ekers, Honorary Professor, University of York, Clinical Director of Research and Development at Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust.

Professor Gilbody said: "Our University-NHS partnership is ideally placed to respond to new societal challenges of COVID-19.

"Older people and those with long term conditions have now entered enforced isolation, and this risks an explosion of loneliness and depression for this vulnerable population.

"We propose to rapidly adapt an existing programme to test whether our intervention can prevent and mitigate the onset of depression and loneliness among older people."

## Shielding

Professor Carolyn Chew-Graham, a GP and leading researcher in the mental health of older

people, based at Keele University added, "COVID-19 will inevitably impact on the mental health of older people. We know that social isolation does not inevitably lead to depression and loneliness, but having physical health problems is a risk factor for depression, and the additional stress of [social isolation](#) or shielding may well cause people to suffer from low mood and anxiety. In this study, we will test how we can maintain older people's mental health during this difficult time."

The research team hope to deliver a very brief and manualised [intervention](#) that can be delivered at scale in the UK and overseas.

Professor David Ekers, who works both at the University of York and the Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Trust, added: "We have been researching in this area for the past 10 years, and we are ideally placed to help establish 'what works' in maintaining good mental health during the lockdown. This represents a great alliance between the Universities and the NHS to address one of the major challenges posed by COVID."

Provided by University of York

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