

Technology in support of social engagement

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Purpose Social connectedness is a key contributor to overall quality of life and social activities are important for health and well-being. Social connectedness with family, friends, and communities are important goals for older adults to enhance life satisfaction. For older adults, social engagement may be particularly important due to the life-changing events that can accompany older adulthood, including retirement, relocation, health challenges, or mobility limitations. Social communication technologies, including email, social networking, and video chat, have potential to impact how individuals of all ages interact socially (and inter-generationally). We will focus on the opportunities these technologies provide to bolster social engagement in older adults. Social communication technologies have the potential to strengthen existing social ties by allowing new forms of communication and the sharing of information between older adults and their social connections. Furthermore, these technologies also afford older adults the opportunity to forge new social ties by connecting with others who share similar interests or experiences (e.g., online health groups or book clubs). Technology to support social engagement from CREATE research will be discussed.

Methods Email. In the PRISM trial, we provided older adults at risk for social isolation with the opportunity to learn to use email. Along with using other aspects of PRISM, active engagement with email reduced loneliness (Czaja et al., 2018). Social networking. In a focus group study we explored older adults' use of social networking and the facilitators and barriers to willingness to use and enjoyment of these social engagement tools (Bixter et al., 2019). Video chat. We collaborated with a company called OneClick.chat to optimize a video chat platform for use by older adults with and without mild cognitive impairment to engage in conversations with individuals who have shared interests (Harris et al., in press).

Results & Discussion There are a number of common themes to these studies. First, older adults were interested in using social engagement technology, if they understood how it might be useful to them. Second, design with consideration for older adults' capabilities and limitations was critical for successful engagement. Third, instruction and training were necessary, with extra support required for individuals with mild cognitive impairment. Fourth, older adults enjoyed using the technologies to communicate with their existing social networks (i.e., friends and family members), but also to develop new connections with people sharing their interests, goals, and experiences. In sum, the potential for providing support for social connectedness via technology in older adult communities remains under-utilized as a means to enhancing quality of life.

References

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