

How to engage residents to thrive, not just survive, amid COVID-19

Months after COVID-19 hit the United States, senior living administrators continue to struggle to ensure that residents have access to high-quality activities. That's because of the very protocols put in place to keep residents safe related to social distancing, quarantines and isolation.

Indeed, COVID-19 has served as a reminder to senior living professionals that engaging residents is much more than entertainment, according to Jill Vitale-Aussem and Gail Lancaster, speakers at a recent webinar. Vitale-Aussem and Lancaster, both of whom have been administrators, believe that engaging residents to thrive, not just survive, amid COVID-19 can restore quality to their lives and the lives of staff members, extended families and other loved ones. The key, they said, is a mindful, whole-person approach.

Holistic engagement

The Eden Alternative, of which Vitale-Aussem is president and CEO, brought together a task force of culture change experts in 2004 and identified seven "Domains of Well-Being" that, together, can help identify residents' unmet needs:

- Identity: Being well-known, having personhood, individuality, having a history.



Credit: sanjey/E+/Getty Images Plus

The pandemic is a reminder that engaging residents is much more than entertainment.

- Growth: Development, enrichment, expanding, evolving.
- Autonomy: Liberty, self-determination, choice, freedom.
- Security: Freedom from doubt, anxiety, or fear; safety; privacy; dignity; respect.
- Connectedness: Belonging; engaged; involved; connected to time, place and nature.
- Meaning: Significance, heart, hope, value, purpose, sacredness.
- Joy: Happiness, pleasure, delight, contentment, enjoyment.

Lancaster, executive director of The Oaks at Hampton, Cumming, GA, said

that during the pandemic, the domains of connectedness, autonomy, meaning and joy have been most affected by the COVID-19 crisis, although the other domains are just as important.

"Connectedness is, arguably, the domain most affected by this pandemic, for obvious reasons. We have all of these restrictions, and people can't see their loved ones," she said. "We need to feel engaged and involved. We need to feel we belong in order to feel alive."

Lancaster shared examples of some of the ways The Oaks at Hampton has addressed the challenges:

- One resident who wasn't respond-

ing well to pen pal exercises experienced profound connectedness when arrangements were made to allow her to be near horses, a vestige of her past.

- Several residents, some of whom had younger-onset dementia, regained a sense of autonomy through activities such as gardening. One resident, a former surgeon, was engaged to provide health advice.
- A former postmaster now residing in assisted living gained newfound meaning in life when given responsibilities for sorting and sanitizing mail at the community.

Vitale-Aussem called the domains a “litmus test.”

“If you’re not meeting the Domains of Well-Being, however your organization may measure those, you’re really not going to have engagement,” she said. “And the same is true with technology.”

Improving engagement strategies

“Technology has really been brought to the forefront with this pandemic,” Vitale-Aussem said.

Whether it’s via a computer, mobile device or television; to provide options for exercise, music or faith; or to make video-conferencing accessible — technology can enhance autonomy and independence, support interaction and confidence, enhance meaning and purpose, and drive results.

In fact, technology’s role in enhancing autonomy and promoting engagement, happiness and joy is unmistakable, Vitale-Aussem said. She warned, however, that “there’s a tendency to get technology for the sake of technology,” which can cause the initiative to fail if the value isn’t seen.

“Real life is more than one scheduled group program after another,” she said. “After all, none of us craves to have a series of appointments on our day off.”

When evaluating technology or a system or platform, Vitale-Aussem said, answer the following questions:

- Is it adaptable and easy to use?
- Does it promote happiness, contentment and joy?
- Does it give people the opportunity to do something they can’t or won’t do in a group setting?
- Does it support individuality, self-determination, choice and spontaneity?
- Does it make residents physically, emotionally or socially stronger?
- Can it help residents or family members feel more secure and less worried?
- Does it support online interactions with family and friends?
- Does it provide opportunities for learning new things, giving back and helping others, forming meaningful connections with others, and bringing a smile to someone’s face?
- Can it be integrated seamlessly into the community?
- Does it help staff improve resident care and well-being?

Driving adoption

Successful and meaningful technology adoption comes when older adults can easily perceive its value and, when possible, take part in its selection, Vitale-Aussem said.

“This is a great opportunity to think differently in organizations where everyone has a role to play, where residents are part of the solution and actually assist with issues such as infec-

tion control or are invited to have input on decisions that affect them directly or personally,” she said. “So when you focus on well-being, you start to reframe what engagement really means.”

Technology also can keep families engaged and connected, Vitale-Aussem said. The caveats: Ensure that it offers security and connectivity. Work toward providing and encouraging the use of technology that strengthens whole health, not merely offers a mindless distraction.

Senior living professionals must ask themselves:

- Does the technology do more than entertain? Does it engage the mind, body or soul?
- Will the technology help engage residents today and into the future?
- Does the technology provide insights that improve resident well-being?

Residents will be more willing to learn a new technology if they understand how it benefits them, she said. And even if a technology does not benefit them directly — perhaps it benefits staff members, for instance — residents may be willing to use it to “help and make a difference” for those who care for them.

“This is the most challenging time our field has faced, and it’s also the biggest opportunity we’ve ever had to rethink, re-evaluate and remake our communities,” Vitale-Aussem said.

She recommended “finding some space to really reflect and see what we can learn and what we might be able to do differently as a result of what we’re experiencing right now.” ■

To learn more, visit www.sentric.net