



Co-RIG Project

# Enhancing Mental Health Supports During COVID-19: Evaluating self-care tools for older adults

**Project lead:** Mark Yaffe, MD, CM, MCISc, CCFP, FCFP, Professor, Department of Family Medicine, McGill University and Clinician-Scientist, St. Mary's Hospital Center

**Project location:** Montreal, Québec

## Summary

Throughout the pandemic, family physicians have attempted to respond to the mental health needs of their patients. Dr. Mark Yaffe evaluated the effectiveness of an adapted self-care tool protocol offered with telephone coaching from trained non-health care personnel that aimed to support family physicians in their care of older adult patients with mental health problems. Evaluation results will hopefully support such an optimized approach to care for this group of patients.

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## Faces of COVID-19

### Helping patients with mental health challenges

Louise, age 75, has heart disease, and was hospitalized twice in 2019. She lives alone and is feeling lonely and anxious. In a telephone consultation, Louise's doctor enquired into her mood and employed common and rapidly used validated measures to assess her anxiety and depression symptoms. After assessing the results, the doctor linked Louise with a trained lay coach who worked with her over a series of telephone calls to use a workbook to better understand her feelings and to apply tools specifically aimed at her unique problems. Two months later during a follow-up telephone assessment, Louise said she was feeling less anxious and more supported, an assertion supported by improvements in her anxiety and depression scores.

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## Project detail

As a result of the pandemic, many older adults restricted at home may experience increased anxiety and depression and be less likely to see their family physicians. This could be due to public health stay-at-home orders, family physicians being seconded to other priority health care sites, or patient concerns about being exposed to COVID-19 in clinical settings.

Dr. Mark Yaffe, a family physician clinician-scientist, together with a multidisciplinary team at St. Mary's Hospital Centre in Montreal, recognized the potential negative impact of COVID-19 on older patients with chronic conditions. In response, they adapted the team's existing approach of supporting older adult patients with mental health problems through telephone coaching and self-care tools.

With Co-RIG funding, the team evaluated two approaches that have the potential to assist family physicians in handling anxiety and depression symptoms in patients, improving their coping skills during the pandemic. The first one provided older adults with known chronic illness with validated self-care tools and three telephone calls with trained lay coaches over two months. The second approach provided self-care tools alone.

With the pandemic increasing the need for mental health support and potentially limited access to trained coaches and other health care resources, Dr. Yaffe and team wanted to understand if patients and physicians would find a scaled-back version of an existing effective program useful to supporting undermanaged mental health symptoms.

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## Impact

- **Person-centred approach:** Based on principles of cognitive behavioural therapy, the team's self-care tools have been shown to lessen symptoms of depression and anxiety and strengthen patients' self-care skills.<sup>1,2</sup> The addition of coaching increases use and value of the intervention and further improves patient outcomes.
- **Improving access:** Providing care at home also allowed patients who are worried about visiting health care facilities to receive care at home and to connect with community support easily.
- **Building capacity:** Post pandemic, this approach can continue to serve as a valuable tool for primary care teams—helping address unmet mental health needs of older patients and others who have challenges in accessing timely, effective support.

## Results to date

- A total of 181 patients were contacted by the research team.
- Of these, half were eligible and interested in the study and self-care tools: 90 patients were enrolled and randomized into the study.
- Ninety-four per cent of participants used the tools.
- Satisfaction scores were high among both groups, and two thirds of those who completed the study planned to continue using the tools.
- The intervention was found to be feasible and acceptable.

## Methodology

- Recruit home-based older patients with known chronic illness and randomly divide them into two groups: those provided with self-care tools individually targeted to their most predominant mental health symptom and telephone calls with trained lay coaches; and those receiving self-guided tools alone.
- Distribute self-care tools to both groups, conduct up to three coaching calls over eight weeks to the first group.
- Conduct follow-up calls with all participants eight weeks after receipt of the self-care tools.
- Assess data collected on patient depression and anxiety levels, use of the self-care tools, completed coaching calls, and client satisfaction to refine approach and support scale and spread of the initiative.
- Measure patient outcomes using validated surveys assessing symptoms of depression, severity of anxiety, and health care experience.
- Where patient permission was granted, results of the mental health symptom severity screeners were shared with their family physicians.

“Many people with chronic illness have some associated mental health symptoms and the pandemic has made this worse. Family physicians may identify individuals who could benefit from broadened mental health support. Our program provides patients with tools to help them work on their own mental wellbeing in the longer term.”

– Dr. Mark Yaffe, project lead

<sup>1</sup>McCusker J, Jones J, Li M, Faria R, Yaffe MJ, Lambert S, et al. CanDirect: Effectiveness of a telephone-supported depression self-care intervention for cancer survivors. *J Clin Oncol*. 2021;39(10):1150-1161. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33555912>. Accessed May 19, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>McCusker J, Cole MG, Yaffe M, Strumpf E, Sewitch M, Sussman T, et al. A randomized trial of a depression self-care toolkit with or without lay telephone coaching for primary care patients with chronic physical conditions. *Gen Hosp Psychiatry*. 2015;37(3):257-265. Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26003664/>. Accessed May 19, 2021. [Corrigendum: *Gen Hosp Psychiatry*. 2016;40:75-83].

### Project team

**Project lead: Mark Yaffe**, MD, CM, MCISc, CCFP, FCFP, Department of Family Medicine, McGill University, and St. Mary's Hospital Centre of the Integrated University Centre for Health and Social Services of West Island of Montreal

**Alexandra Barnabé**, Psychotherapist/Coach Supervisor, St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Eric Belzile**, MSc, St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Manon de Raad**, BCom, St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Jeannie Haggerty**, PhD, Department of Family Medicine, McGill University, and St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Sylvie Lambert**, PhD, RN, Ingram School of Nursing, McGill University, and St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Jane McCusker**, MD, DrPH, Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics, and Occupational Health, McGill University, and St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Ari Meguerditchian**, MD, MSc, FRCS, FACS, Department of Surgery, McGill University Health Centre, and St. Mary's Research Centre, St. Mary's Hospital Centre

**Marc Pineault**, MSc, Integrated University Centre for Health and Social Services of West Island of Montreal