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Dear Editor,

Internationally, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed older adults at particularly high risk of severe health consequences, including death (1) and negative consequences of social distancing measures (2). Concerns about how older Australians were coping prompted Australian Seniors, an insurance provider, to commission a large-scale on-line survey, conducted in April, 2020 (see <https://www.seniors.com.au/news-insights/australian-seniors-series-connectivity-during-covid-19>).

Altogether, 5,003 over-50s (773 generation Xers [aged 50-54], 3,669 baby boomers [aged 55-74], and 531 pre-boomers [aged 75+]) responded to the survey on their COVID experience, including questions on their activities and the impacts of mandated social isolation. Responses to key items were compared across generational groups.

On most indicators, the pre-boomers reported most success in adapting to the pandemic, compared to baby boomers and generation X (Table 1). While most respondents (89.9%) agreed that they had coped surprisingly well with the pandemic, this proportion was 5.9 percentage points higher among the pre-boomer than the generation Xers.

Overall, the pre-boomers were mostly likely to have maintained their daily routines. They were least likely to report difficulty sustaining pre-COVID physical exercise and diet routines and most likely to be engaged in activities to support their mental health. In comparison, the youngest group reported the greatest variation from their pre-COVID experience, with both more improvement and more decline in well-being than the other two groups. Despite social isolation being a major concern for all respondents, 39.2% of the youngest generation reported feeling lonelier, compared with 36.4% of the baby boomers and just 26.0% of the oldest group.

One explanation for this apparent generational difference is that the pandemic has had widespread impacts on the economy, employment, and income security. These changes have likely placed

significant stress on those aged in their 50s, who are most likely to be employed, paying off mortgages, and supporting older parents. Unemployment is a concern, as the over-50s are less likely to re-enter the workforce if they lose employment (3). These stresses may create downward pressure on other health behaviours and conditions, including sedentary behaviours and poor nutrition (4).

Overall, this survey suggests that a large portion of older adults were coping well in the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not unexpected, as older adults tend to react less extremely to stressful life events than younger adults (5). Although risk of poor health outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic increases with age, adjustment appears to be most successful in the oldest group.

[Insert Table 1 here]

References

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Table 1: Responses to how older adults have been coping and adapting through the COVID-19 pandemic

		Age (years)		
		Gen X	Baby boomers	Pre-boomers
		50 – 54	55 – 74	75 +
		%	%	%
General adaptation				
I am finding myself adapting to all this surprisingly well	Strongly agree	31.9	28.2	30.9
	Agree	55.7	61.6	62.8
	Disagree	9.3	7.9	5.1
	Strongly disagree	3.0	2.3	1.2
Activities to look after mental health				
Following usual exercise routines	More	17.5	14.2	10.6
	Around the same	50.5	59.3	62.9
	Less	32.0	26.4	26.5
Frequency of daily exercise	More	22.8	17.7	12.9
	Around the same	47.5	57.9	63.2
	Less	29.7	24.4	24.0
Weekly time spent cleaning	More	41.6	34.8	26.7
	Around the same	55.2	61.5	66.6
	Less	3.2	3.6	6.7
Eating healthy food	More	23.4	20.6	17.5
	Around the same	66.7	73.3	79.8
	Less	10.0	6.1	2.7
Most challenging activity to maintain				
Following usual exercise routines	Easier	13.3	11.1	6.1
	Around the same	48.3	56.2	66.6
	Harder	38.4	32.7	27.2
Keeping up weekly time spent exercising	Easier	16.0	12.8	8.2
	Around the same	48.3	56.1	65.7
	Harder	35.7	31.1	26.1
Keeping up weekly time spent outdoors	Easier	18.1	15.5	12.7
	Around the same	41.5	47.2	53.6
	Harder	40.4	37.4	33.7
Eating healthy food	Easier	17.9	15.8	12.9
	Around the same	62.8	71.6	80.0
	Harder	19.3	12.5	7.1
	Easier	20.4	18.4	16.2

Avoiding eating unhealthy food	Around the same	50.6	58.2	66.1
	Harder	29.0	23.4	17.7
Engaging in self-care activities	No	53.8	64.0	68.4
	No, but looking to do this	20.3	11.8	12.5
	Yes	25.9	24.1	19.0
Self-care activities	Importance of outdoor activity	40.7	41.8	52.8
	Focus on hobbies and personal interests	61.2	64.7	69.7
	Stay connected with family/friends by phone	63.8	74.3	82.2
	Avoid the news and 'doom and gloom' in the media as much as possible	36.3	34.4	40.3
	Maintain positive thinking and hope about the future	62.1	62.5	77.6
Self-isolation and loneliness	Much more lonely	12.5	9.7	4.0
	Somewhat more lonely	26.7	26.7	22.0
	About the same	55.4	58.8	67.9
	Somewhat less lonely	3.4	2.8	3.7
	Much less lonely	1.9	2.0	2.3
Impact of social isolation, so far				
Physical health	Much better	7.1	4.9	3.3
	Somewhat better	12.5	8.4	8.3
	About the same	51.2	62.3	70.7
	Somewhat worse	24.6	21.2	15.7
	Much worse	4.7	3.2	2.0
Mental health	Much better	6.0	3.9	1.5
	Somewhat better	7.2	4.9	5.9
	About the same	49.7	61.1	73.6
	Somewhat worse	30.3	24.6	17.9
	Much worse	6.8	5.5	1.1
Future impact of social isolation				
Physical health	Much better	8.7	5.0	1.2
	Somewhat better	10.8	7.2	6.6
	About the same	49.6	56.4	64.4
	Somewhat worse	20.6	23.9	23.4
	Much worse	10.3	7.5	4.5
Mental health	Much better	6.1	3.4	0.8
	Somewhat better	6.5	3.6	3.1
	About the same	42.5	51.8	65.1
	Somewhat worse	31.8	31.0	26.9
	Much worse	13.1	10.2	4.1