

Conversaciones con los Abuelos: A Collaboration to Promote Social and Emotional Wellness for Latinx Elders



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RATIONALE

The toll of the COVID-19 pandemic is not equally felt. Marginalized groups such as ethnic and racial minority elders, may experience even more challenges to social connection and wellness. Community in older adulthood is often sought at local community-based centers¹, but when the pandemic forced these to shut down, seniors experienced a loss of routines and social interaction. Simultaneously, the technology enabling remote connection is not widely available, contributing to the increased social isolation, loneliness and mental health concerns experienced by vulnerable groups.

In an effort to support Latinx elders, [Centro Cultural](#), a local Latinx non-profit, created a program called Edad de Oro (*golden age*), with the goals of supporting elders' wellness, cultural connection, and social relationships. Before the pandemic, this program was a place for seniors to find connection, to engage in culturally congruent self-care practices and build community. However, during the pandemic, Centro had to adapt the services, and Edad de Oro participants lost access to daily peer connections.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Centro saw the social and emotional challenges of their elders and reached out to [Sabiduría](#), a graduate psychology program from [Pacific University](#), focused on training students in working with Latinx individuals using culturally and linguistic informed approaches. Together, they developed a project, "Conversaciones con los Abuelos", with a mission for students to provide weekly informal social and emotional support via phone, while helping elders navigate barriers to services.

The primary goal of Conversaciones con los Abuelos was for graduate psychology students to support the efforts of Centro Cultural to foster social and emotional support among Latinx elders during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Centro Cultural's team included Edad de Oro program coordinator and several Centro Cultural staff members/volunteers.

- Centro Cultural oversaw the program, provided lists of socially isolated or otherwise vulnerable elders who might benefit from additional support, fulfilled needs of elders expressed in phone calls with students, provided consultation and made weekly calls to elders.

Pacific University's team included a faculty supervisor, student program coordinator, student data analyst, student outreach coordinator, and several students involved in the *Sabiduría* Latinx Psychology program.

- Pacific University coordinated the program, made weekly calls to elders, documented all encounters and encounter attempts, sent occasional mail correspondence, provided consultation, supervision and support to students, created mental health information materials and emotional health care kits.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION BETWEEN STUDENTS AND SENIORS

FOSTERING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students provided empathetic and attentive listening • Spirituality
ENCOURAGING HEALTHY BEHAVIORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining physical activity levels and social connection during the pandemic • Managing physical ailments, chronic illnesses, and mental health concerns
FOSTERING SOCIAL SUPPORT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practicing and learning English with students • Daily activities and routines, family life, and hobbies • History of seniors such as childhood and family memories
MANAGING PANDEMIC-RELATED STRESS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coping with life changes due to COVID-19 • Grieving loss of routines, loss of family connection
SPECIFIC NEEDS EXPRESSED BY SENIORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tangible goods (e.g., tennis shoes, books, heaters) • Community resources (e.g., assistance in paying bills, support in making medical appointments)

PROGRAM OUTPUTS

Elders and students have reported finding the program enriching and transformational; demonstrating the value of collaboration during uncertain times. Since the start of the program in June 2020,

- 17 students and 23 seniors have been involved
- 225 calls have been made to the seniors to date
- Calls amount to 38.75 hours
- 26 correspondence items have been sent or dropped off to seniors (letters, cards, and identified needs).
- Information about mental health and emotional health resources and emotional self-care kits (image on right) were sent to all elders involved in the program (about 55 elders).



Self-care kit contents include: reusable shopping bag, *culturally appropriate snacks, five senses materials such as: *prayer candle, arts and craft materials, stress ball, *skin care products, *hand sanitizer, also *handmade mask, gratitude jar making kit, teas, chocolate, tree ornament, and emotional health resources. *Denotes item purchased from a small, local, and/or Latinx-owned business

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Associated with negative mental and physical health outcomes², loneliness among older adults during the pandemic is especially threatening as it results in compounded risk factors for worsening health outcomes.^{3,4} The times call for community-based interventions and outreach focused on supporting our communities' vulnerable populations^{5, 6}.

Stepping into our communities with the intent of supporting social-emotional wellness, bringing mental health to the people and 'giving psychology away'⁷, is a meaningful way to mitigate negative outcomes associated with the risk factors posed during the pandemic.

A collaborative partnership between mental health professionals and community-serving organizations optimizes trust, access to psychological wellness and expertise of community needs.

We recommend:

1. Supporting the existing initiatives of community-serving organizations with innovated ways of promoting mental and emotional wellness.
2. Collaborating with community-serving organizations to address gaps in health and wellness services for their community members.

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