Overcoming social distancing in interventions with older adults by using digital media?

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It was shown that older adults’ health literacy has deteriorated in course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two ongoing interventions aiming to improve health and food literacy as well as self-management by regular in-person meetings with working groups for persons aged 60 and older were put on hold. To help orientating in an information flood, to stay rooted in social networks, and to counteract intervention drop-out, a bridging program was developed. Telephone interviews with peer-moderators on technical equipment for digital communication, media literacy and relevant topics were conducted. The peer-moderators were trained in performing video and phone conferences as well as phone chains. A total number of 23 moderators leading 15 groups with 170 participants were involved in the interventions before the lockdown. It was found that the majority of participants were not able or equipped to perform video or telephone conferences. Based on these findings, health information and exercises were sent periodically by post and each group implemented a phone chain. Both measures were well-accepted by all groups. Conference calls with the moderators were conducted only twice due to low acceptance. Despite training for video conferences, none of the groups managed to use digital media alone for communication. Nevertheless, only four groups, nine moderators and 94 participants, quit the program during the lockdown. The acceptance of the moderators is key to introduce the participants to new communication channels. Due to insufficient digitalized homes, lack of digital devices or technical affinity, the distribution predominantly took place via postal dispatch. Even though the bridging program was well accepted, participants still rather waited until in-person meetings were allowed again instead of swapping to digital communication. A regular, participatory developed, multi-channel intervention can help to engage older adults and maintain intervention research in times of crisis.
Key messages:
- Multichannel and participatory developed interventions can help group programs with older adults surviving a crisis.
- Mere digital communication, lacking knowledge and equipment can discourage older adults to stay socially active.