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**The National Resource Center
for Engaging Older Adults**

TAPPING INTO TECHNOLOGY
to Stay Connected and Engaged

Table of Contents

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The National Resource Center
for Engaging Older Adults

eldercare
locator
Connecting You to Community Services

OATS | OLDER ADULTS TECHNOLOGY SERVICES
FROM AARP

USAging
Leaders in Aging Well at Home

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Administration for Community Living

TAPPING INTO TECHNOLOGY
to Stay Connected and Engaged

Introduction

Staying connected and engaged with friends, family and community is important, not just because it adds pleasure and meaning, but because it can also improve our quality of life and support our overall physical health and mental health. Read on to discover simple tips to getting started using technology to stay connected and engaged!

Technology and Engagement

Using technology is just one way to maintain social connections and stay engaged in your community. You don't necessarily need to leave your home. You can also use the telephone, tablet or computer to connect with family, friends and others.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and physical distancing was needed to protect the health and safety of all, technology quickly became one of the main ways for people to stay connected. Aging Network organizations such as Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and Title VI Native American Aging Programs transitioned many social engagement programs, as well as other programs, to virtual platforms to address the increased social isolation older adults were confronting. Instead of in-person events, older adults could instead participate in social engagement programs through the phone, technology platforms like Zoom or Facebook Live, public access television, radio stations and pre-programmed tablets.

The Future of Technology and Engagement

Beyond the pandemic, technology will continue to play an important role in fostering social connections and engagement. There are many opportunities to engage in both in-person and virtual activities, so you can decide which option is best for you.

Whether you're a technology novice or if you could use a helpful refresher, this brochure will help you navigate how to access technology that can help you stay engaged and connected now and in the future.

Importance of Social Engagement

Social engagement has positive impacts on the physical, emotional and mental health and well-being of older adults while also serving as an opportunity to share knowledge, skills and experience with others. Maintaining connections and staying engaged with family, friends and your community can decrease your risk of becoming socially isolated or lonely. Research shows remaining socially engaged is associated with a reduced risk of early death among those with greater social connections[1].

[1] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20668659/

Using Technology to Connect

Platform Options

Video Calls

During the COVID-19 pandemic, video call platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime and Skype quickly became a lifeline for many, allowing people to stay in touch with loved ones, attend religious services or creative performances, learn new skills and keep up with medical visits. The nature of virtual events means that you can participate in events that are hosted in your own community—or across the globe. Virtual events are an effective way to stay connected and even meet new people! For example, Senior Planet has hosted **virtual events** (seniorplanet.org/get-involved/online) on **Zoom** (www.zoom.us) that have helped to build an online community during the pandemic.

Social Media

Social media platforms are great for keeping up with friends and family along with organizations you may be interested in. The "Live" feature of both **Facebook** (www.facebook.com) and **Instagram** (www.instagram.com) is a fun way to watch live-streamed videos from friends and organizations you follow. **YouTube** (www.youtube.com) is another option to watch user-generated videos, find footage of concerts, and enjoy classic movies and TV shows. Follow your favorite public personalities on **Twitter** (twitter.com) to keep tabs on your elected officials, celebrities and others.

Email

Email is a useful way to stay in touch with friends and family, and to quickly send and receive information. It's also the key to signing up for many services, platforms and even appointments. Some of the most popular and free email services are **Gmail** (www.gmail.com), **Yahoo** (www.yahoo.com) and **Outlook** (outlook.live.com/owa).

Messaging Applications (Apps)

Messaging apps are another great way to stay in touch with friends and family. Both Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp let you exchange messages as well as make video calls. You'll need a Facebook account to use Facebook Messenger. To get started with WhatsApp, simply **download the app** (www.whatsapp.com) to your smartphone!

To connect to video calls, social media, email, and other websites and applications, you need:

A smartphone + a cell phone plan

OR

A computer or tablet + an internet subscription/ plan

Need Help Getting Started with Connecting to Others or Technology?

AAAs offer social engagement programs in communities across the country. Contact the Eldercare Locator to get connected to your local AAA. You can reach the **Eldercare Locator** at (800) 677-1116, Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET.

Do you need help participating in video calls, signing up for social media, setting up an email account or downloading apps? Contact the **National Senior Planet Hotline** at (888) 713-3495! Open Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. ET, the hotline can help with technology issues you may experience.

Device Options

Each of the devices described below offer different designs and sizes to match individual preferences, and *all* of these devices allow you to perform basic online activities: video calls, compose emails, look at photos, shop online and watch videos. The listing below describes the unique aspects of each device.

Tablets

Tablets such as the Apple iPad, Amazon Fire and Samsung Galaxy tablets offer intuitive, touchscreen interfaces and built-in apps with access to thousands of additional easy-to-use apps. With a larger screen than a smartphone, tablets have everything you need to get online.

> Once you have a tablet, you would also need: Wi-Fi in your home to connect your tablet to the internet.

Laptops

Laptops, including Chromebooks, Macs, Personal Computers (PCs) and affordable options such as refurbished laptops, provide nearly everything you need to access the internet except the internet plan. From a laptop you can do a variety of online activities. While larger than tablets, they are portable and have a medium-sized screen.

> To connect your laptop to the internet, you would need to purchase an internet plan for your home.

Two-in-One Devices

A "two-in-one" device like the Zenbook Flip or Samsung Galaxy Book Flex, which includes a touchscreen interface, can be used either as a traditional laptop or a tablet. While they tend to be more expensive, these devices can offer the best of both worlds for users who want flexibility.

> To connect your two-in-one device to the internet, you would need to purchase an internet plan for your home.

Desktop Computer

A desktop computer typically includes a monitor, tower, mouse and keyboard. Though they aren't portable, desktop PCs don't run on battery, so you don't have to worry about charging. Desktops are generally more affordable than laptops.

> To connect your desktop to the internet, you would need to purchase an internet plan for your home.
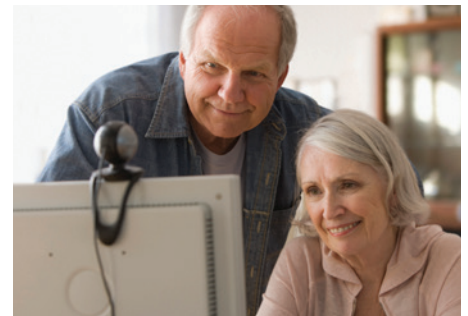
Smartphones

You don't have to buy the latest model to take advantage of smartphone technology. Older models are often available at discounted prices and have the same basic features you need (phone, text, email, internet access). The general recommendation is to buy the most recent model you can comfortably afford.

> If you buy your smartphone from a cell phone carrier, you usually pay for the phone and always pay for the cell phone plan/subscription, which is billed monthly.

Assistive Technology Built Into Devices

Assistive Technology
Assistive technology (AT) helps maintain or improve the functioning and independence of older adults and people with disabilities in recreation, education, employment and activities of daily living. AT can range from low-tech devices like handheld magnifiers or pen or pencil grips to high-tech devices and equipment like digital hearing aids, voice-activated telephones, or electronic aids to help with tasks like cooking, bathing, dressing and more. AT can help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness by connecting those who use it with family and friends and providing you with a way to participate in community activities. If you are interested in AT, contact your state AT program for information and assistance through the **National Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training (AT3) Center** (www.at3center.net/stateprogram).

There are lots of helpful, built-in assistive features for most smartphones, tablets and computers that help people who have difficulty typing, speaking, writing, hearing or reading on screen. Access features addressing specific needs can generally be found under the Settings and/or the Accessibility section of the device you are using.

Vision
- Voice over (speaks items on the screen)
- Zoom (makes text and images larger)
- Many options for font size, contrast and brightness
- Screen color adjustment

Hearing
- Increase/decrease volume
- Subtitles and captioning
- Noise cancellation

Physical and Motor
- Assistive Touch (adapts gestures like pressing the home button, pinching the screen to zoom in, rotating the screen to make them more comfortable)
- Touch Accommodations (adjusts how the screen responds to different kinds of touches)
- Keyboard options (dictation or predictive text can help with typing)
- Touch control areas (limit touch control to certain areas of the screen)

Lower-Cost Internet and Cell Phone Carrier Options

- The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) **Emergency Broadband Benefit** (www.fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit) offers a discount on internet service for low-income households.

- The **Senior Planet Stuck at Home Guide: How to Get Online** (seniorplanet.org/stuck-at-home-guide-get-online) provides additional information on low-cost options for older adults from internet service providers, including:

  - **Comcast Internet Essentials**
    www.internetessentials.com

  - **Spectrum Internet Assist**
    www.spectrum.com/internet/spectrum-internet-assist

  - **Altice Advantage**
    www.alticeadvantageinternet.com

  - **Verizon through the Lifeline program**
    www.verizon.com/support/residential/account/manage-account/lifeline-discount

  - **AT&T**
    m.att.com/shopmobile/internet/access/

  - **Viasat**
    www.viasat.com

  - **Hughesnet**
    internet.hughesnet.com

  - **Xfinity hot spots**
    www.xfinity.com/support/articles/open-xfinity-wifi-hotspots

● Carriers that may have lower-cost cell phone plan options include:

- **AT&T**
  www.att.com
- **Boost Mobile Unlimited**
  www.boostmobile.com
- **Consumer Cellular**
  www.consumercellular.com
- **Lively**
  www.lively.com
- **T-Mobile**
  www.t-mobile.com
- **Tracfone**
  www.tracfone.com
- **US Mobile**
  www.usmobile.com
- **Verizon**
  www.verizon.com

Technology Innovations Spotlights

Smart Speakers

Smart speakers like Amazon Echo or Google Home use voice-activated technology that can answer questions and help with certain tasks like playing music. Smart speakers connect to the internet through Wi-Fi, though a smartphone or computer may be needed for initial setup. They respond to your voice commands and if you connect your smart speaker to other smart devices like a smart TV, you can ask your smart speaker to turn your television off or on. You can also use smart speakers to play interactive games that stimulate your mind or make phone calls to connect with family and friends. If you are interested in learning more about smart speakers, contact your state AT program for information and assistance. You can find your state AT program through the **National Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training (AT3) Center** (www.at3center.net/stateprogram).

Robotic Pets

Robotic pets offer an alternative to owning a pet. These battery-powered pets are designed to look, feel, sound and interact like live pets. They make similar noises, you can feel their heartbeat and they even respond to touch. Robotic pets can help reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness by offering comfort, connection and companionship. There are several companies that provide robotic pets, so if you are interested in learning more, contact your local **Area Agency on Aging** (eldercare.acl.gov) to see if they can help you obtain a robotic pet.

Resources

Finding Resources and Support

Interested in finding local resources to get connected to technology and social engagement activities? Contact the **Eldercare Locator** (eldercare.acl.gov) as a starting point. Staff can connect older adults and caregivers to your Area Agency on Aging (AAA) or other community organizations to help you learn about available technology options and what engagement activities are offered for older adults in your community. Visit the Eldercare Locator's website at **eldercare.acl.gov** or contact its call center at (800) 677-1116. The **Eldercare Locator's COVID-19 resources page** (eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Resources/covid_19.aspx) also offers national resources you can access to stay connected and engaged.

Need assistance with using technology? Contact the **National Senior Planet Hotline** (seniorplanet.org), which assists older adults who need support with technology. You can call the hotline directly at (888) 713-3495. The **Senior Planet COVID-19 resources page** (seniorplanet.org/coronavirus-2) also provides tips on how to get online at home and stay connected, including Zoom instructions, resources for low-cost internet, and video tutorials for different technology platforms and apps.

Interested in accessing assistive technology (AT)? Contact your state AT program for information and assistance on available devices, device demonstrations and device lending programs. You can find your state AT program information through the **National Assistive Technology Act Training and Technical Assistance (AT3) Center State Assistive Technology Program Directory** (www.at3center.net/stateprogram). The **AT3 Center Explore AT** (www.at3center.net/exploreat) also offers information and resources on many different AT devices.

When purchasing devices or internet or cell phone plans, it is important to purchase from reputable places. Consult the **OATS website for information on guides** (seniorplanet.org/category/stuck-at-home-guide) and **classes** (seniorplanet.org/get-involved/online). Also read the **Eldercare Locator's Protect Your Pocketbook: Tips to Avoid Financial Exploitation** (www.usaging.org/files/EL-Protect-pocketbookv1-508.pdf) for helpful fraud prevention tips and resources. The **Department of Justice** (www.justice.gov/elderjustice/find-support-elder-abuse) also maintains fraud and abuse resource listings. To report other fraud and abuse contact the **Federal Trade Commission on its Report Fraud website** (reportfraud.ftc.gov).

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engagingolderadults.org

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Eldercare Locator
(800) 677-1116 (Monday–Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. ET)

eldercare.acl.gov

Launched in 1991, the Eldercare Locator is the only national information and referral resource to provide support to consumers across the spectrum of issues affecting older adults. The Locator is funded by the U.S. Administration for Community Living and is administered by USAging.

USAging

usaging.org

USAging is the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities throughout the United States live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities.

Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)

oats.org

OATS helps older adults learn to use and leverage technology to transform their lives and their communities. Through its flagship program, **Senior Planet** (seniorplanet.org), OATS works closely with older adults to create extraordinary experiences in-person and online. As one of AARP's charitable affiliates, the mission of OATS from AARP is "to harness the power of technology to change the way we age."

USAging and engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults do not endorse any particular brands or products. When specific names are listed, they are provided as examples.