

CSA Journal

Connection Without Barriers

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By Robert Pinna





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Connected living is not simply desirable as people age; it has measurable impacts on longevity, cognition, and mobility. A recent U.S. Surgeon General Advisory noted that social isolation and loneliness are predictors of premature death and poor health, carrying risks comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). In addition, a Johns Hopkins–affiliated study found that the risk of developing dementia over nine years was 27% higher among older adults who were socially isolated (Huang et al., 2023).

Although technology has made major strides in helping people remain connected, many older adults still feel left behind. Much of today's consumer technology requires passwords, verification steps, frequent updates, and layered menu systems. Instead of prioritizing simplicity, many products are designed to maximize engagement time. As a result, technology can create barriers rather than delivering on the connection it promises.

The challenge is not that older adults are incapable of using technology. Many engage successfully when tools are intuitive and preserve independence. The limitation often lies in design. Too many products are developed *for* older adults rather than *with* them. This includes the caregivers who support daily use.

This article examines how emerging social technologies strengthen relationships by being human-centered, accessible, and familiar. It highlights what is working today, where innovation is headed, and how Certified Senior Advisors (CSAs) can help families adopt tools that support connection without unnecessary complexity.

What Is Working Today: Technology Designed With Older Adults

Across senior living communities and private homes, the technologies that demonstrate the strongest outcomes tend to share common characteristics. Effective tools typically:

- Fit into daily routines without requiring new behaviors
- Tap into familiar interactions such as voice or visuals
- Reduce friction by prioritizing simplicity over choice overload

Examples of Emerging Connection Technologies

Several categories of tools are gaining traction for their ability to support connection and belonging:

- TV-based video calling systems designed for cognitive ease
- One-touch tablets for video, photos, and messaging
- Ambient photo and video displays that foster daily presence
- Voice-first engagement platforms embedded into daily routines
- Remote-configurable communication devices with simplified interfaces

These tools vary in form but share a focus on familiarity, autonomy, and ease of use.

VOICE-ENABLED TECHNOLOGY

Voice-enabled technology is a clear example. Voice interaction is intuitive, accessible, and particularly useful for individuals with mobility, vision, or cognitive challenges. A 2025 AARP study found that 35% of older adults own a home assistant. A University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging reported that 55% of older adults have used some form of voice-based AI, such as a smart assistant.

When a person can say, “Call my grandson,” rather than scroll through contacts and navigate menus, connection becomes easier and more natural. Voice-first tools can also integrate calendars, reminders, and task prompts, supporting independence through a familiar mode of communication.

Communities using voice-first engagement platforms report consistent use for checking schedules, receiving reminders, and initiating video calls. When a resident can ask, “What am I doing today?” and receive a spoken response rather than navigating an app, autonomy is preserved.

SIMPLIFIED VISUAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Devices such as simplified tablets designed with older adults reduce friction by eliminating passwords, setup complexity, and unnecessary features. These tools allow users to initiate video calls, share photos, and engage in entertainment with minimal steps, reducing anxiety related to technology glitches.

Photo and video frames that automatically rotate

images and can deliver messages from family members provide another form of low-effort connection. Research from the Gerontological Society of America describes this as “passive social presence,” where frequent, low-effort exposure to familiar faces can reduce loneliness and support emotional well-being.

The most effective technologies enhance connection without demanding constant attention or precise navigation.

Where Innovation Is Headed: Technology That Adapts to People

The next phase of social technology centers on adaptation. Rather than asking older adults to adjust to devices, emerging systems are designed to adapt to user intent, ability, and behavior.

Artificial intelligence is increasingly used to infer intent and reduce friction. For example, systems may recognize incomplete commands, mis-taps, or navigation errors and complete tasks based on context. Some platforms monitor usage patterns—such as slower input or repeated errors—and automatically simplify interfaces.

Other developments include:

- Platforms that allow older adults to initiate connection rather than serving primarily as monitoring tools
- Telehealth devices that passively share health data with care teams
- Financial safety tools that flag unusual spending patterns
- Shared experience technologies such as live-streamed classes or virtual group activities

The emphasis is shifting from automation toward enablement—supporting autonomy while preserving dignity.

Using Existing Technology to Support Connection

Creating connection does not always require new devices. Many opportunities lie in optimizing tools already present in the home. AARP research indicates that most adults over fifty own multiple connected devices, including smartphones, tablets, wearables, and home assistants, but often underuse features that support connection (Kakulla, 2024).

CSAs can help families maximize existing tools by:

- Configuring voice assistants for hands-free calling and reminders
- Simplifying home screens to highlight essential functions
- Increasing font sizes and enabling accessibility
- Leveraging wearables for discreet safety and movement tracking

Small configuration changes can significantly increase usability and engagement.

Funding and Access Considerations

Cost is a common concern when families consider technology adoption. However, multiple pathways exist to offset expenses. These include:

- Health and benefits programs that reimburse monitoring or engagement tools
- Veteran and employer-sponsored wellness benefits
- State Assistive Technology Programs offering device loans or refurbished equipment
- Public libraries and community centers providing device access
- Retail trade-in and refurbishment programs

More people now see technology that supports dignity and connection as vital to health and well-being rather than a luxury.

Onboarding and Ongoing Support

For technology to be adopted and optimized, support is needed—especially when it comes to older adults. Effective implementation includes in-home setup, personalized configuration, and ongoing assistance. Tech concierge services, digital literacy coaching, and routine optimization help ensure tools remain aligned with changing needs.

When support is built into the experience, technology becomes less intimidating and more sustainable.

Connection as an Outcome

Inclusive technology succeeds when it empowers a person to stay connected, confident, and in control of their daily life. When tools adapt to older adults and make participation easier, they restore identity, purpose, and belonging.

For CSAs, families, and innovators, the opportunity lies in prioritizing outcomes over features. If a tool strengthens relationships, reduces isolation, or preserves dignity, it is fulfilling its purpose.

The future of aging will be shaped by technology that feels familiar, responds to intent, and empowers older adults to lead connected lives on their own terms. •CSA

AI Disclosure: AI tools were used for light editing to improve clarity and organization; all content and conclusions are the author's.



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CSAs can support families by shifting focus from features to outcomes. Here are some helpful questions to guide this shift.

Does the tool:

- deepen connection?
- reduce isolation?
- preserve dignity and independence?

Helpful framing questions include:

“What would make staying in touch feel easier?”

“Which communication methods feel most natural?”

“Would voice, touch, or visual interaction work best?”

In general, some guiding principles are that technology should reduce burden rather than create it, rely on familiar interfaces to encourage adoption, and prioritize connection that is initiated by the older adult.

technology leadership experience, he has led engineering and product teams across enterprise and consumer technology, focusing on accessible systems that reduce friction and preserve dignity.

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