

The meaning of a community alarm to older people who have experienced a fall

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Introduction: Community alarms allow older people who live alone to summon help if they fall. Despite potential benefits of increased safety and perceived independence, older people vary in their alarm-trigger wearing habits.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore factors that influence community dwelling older people who have experienced a fall to wear or not wear their alarm trigger device.

Methods A qualitative, descriptive phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences and meanings of community alarm use. Unstructured interviews were conducted in homes of 8 older people who had fallen in the past year and who had a community alarm. Depth interviews, rich in symbolic meaning, provided detailed insights into how participants made sense of their personal and social world. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse textual data. Reflexivity and researcher journal assisted with the trustworthiness of this study.

Results: Three overarching themes emerged: the meaning of home; the relevance of technology and the importance of a supportive network of people. The meaning of home as a lived space, providing independence, security and dignity has to be understood from the older person's point of view. Service providers perceive alarms, rather than the lived space providing safety and giving peace of mind to families and carers.

Conclusions: Community alarms are perceived by older people as useful adjuncts to their independence rather than technological advances to healthcare. Family, carers and neighbours play a crucial role in supporting independence which is highly valued. This need to be independent is so strong for some of them that they literally go to bed placing their faith in God.

Contributions to practice: The meaning of a fall as a consequence of old age and the place of home as a symbol of independence are often overlooked by providers of community alarms. If community alarms are to be utilized fully by older people then the symbolic meaning of home and the existing supportive network, rather than the prevention of future falls must be the drivers of assessment processes.