

The loneliness EPIDEMIC

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INSIDE: A FLORIDA WEEKLY / ABC7 EXCLUSIVE SPECIAL REPORT

The loneliness EPIDEMIC

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FLORIDA WEEKLY
IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

Fabiana Solano, 21, of Florida Gulf Coast University, took a proactive approach to her loneliness.

Why are we talking about this?



Laura Eiman of Palm Beach Gardens became involved with the Happiness Club of Palm Beach.

PART I | Why are we talking about this?

“Only the lonely Know the way I feel tonight Only the lonely Know this feeling ain’t right.”

— Only the Lonely by Roy Orbison

More than one-third — 35 percent — of U. S. adults ages 45 and older are lonely, based on the UCLA loneliness scale and reported by AARP in 2018.

AARP further reported that in the subset of midlife, adults ages 45- 49, 46 percent are lonely. The 70- plus age group weighed in lowest at 24 percent.

Nearly half of the 20,000 adults surveyed by Cigna nationwide reported that they sometimes or always feel alone or left out. Millennials (ages 23- 37) rated themselves high on feeling lonely, according to a USA Today report in March.

Forbes reported in May 2019 that loneliness troubles Millennials more than joblessness, homelessness or a cancer diagnosis.

“Generation Z (adults ages 18- 22) is the loneliest generation and claims to be in worse health than older generations,” according to a 2018 Cigna study.

In fall 2018, the American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment survey summary reported that 63.2 percent of its student respondents checked “yes” for feeling very lonely “anytime within the last 12 months.”

ASIDE FROM THE SHEER SHOCK THAT THE U.S. is so statistically lonely, the aftershock comes from the age breakdown. Older adults, retirees left without the meaningfulness of work and companionship: Sure, that makes sense. But look again at the figures. It appears younger adults are becoming increasingly lonely.

Given the rise of social media connections and sheer populations in our lives, this seems all the more ironic. Who are these lonely souls? Why are they lonely? How is their loneliness affecting their health and the health of the nation?

At the recommendation of one of our readers who responded to a survey Florida

Weekly ran this summer, we decided to dig deeper than statistics, to talk to the lonely and the experts who study them, to answer these questions. And to answer one big question: What can we do about it?

“Reporting is redundant,” reader Chris, 70, of Fort Myers, told us, challenging us to publish something beyond the same old rehash of sad statistics demonstrating that the growing loneliness epidemic has reached toxic levels.

Because reader Chris herself has tried, repeatedly, to do something about it. Not just about HER loneliness. But loneliness in her community. But more about Chris and the energy she has lent to this project later. Let’s look first at why we as a society need to address loneliness and solutions right now.

It’s like the weather. Everybody talks about it but ... Or is it really like the weather? Can we actually do something about it? The United Kingdom has appointed a minister of loneliness. Colleges and senior centers have designed programs, workshops and support groups. Social media and online sites welcome victims of loneliness. Researchers write papers. Doctors prescribe drugs.



June Bialecki, 75, is widowed and attends activities at Naples Senior Center.

But what, we at Florida Weekly wondered, can we as the media do about the issue that might improve upon the redundant? Tread into proactivity? Involve the Florida community? Challenge society to take a forward approach to anti-loneliness?

This path started out of curiosity at the volume of media we were seeing on the topic and an idea to run a loneliness survey in the pages of our newspapers for four months. We talked with some of our responders, then we talked to professionals and experts in our communities to learn how Floridians suffer from loneliness, what is being done and what needs to be done.

It's nothing new, loneliness. Artists have been writing and singing about it for centuries, despite the fact the condition historically has been pushed into a corner like an embarrassing freak of nature.

Recently, however, loneliness, like other mental and emotional behavior disorders, is coming into the light of day. It has become a hot topic that has gained traction through significant studies, startling statistics and revelations of its severe and even deadly consequences. Beyond making headlines in senior and psychiatric publications and websites, it has garnered awareness articles in Forbes and The Economist magazines, a multitude of studies, a Lady Gaga documentary, even, and open, frank discussion.

"People are recognizing the subjective experience is very important and meaningful," said Dr. Angelina Sutin, a Florida State University Department of Behavioral Sciences professor who published a 2018 study linking loneliness and dementia. "Psychological factors were previously ignored. In the last decade, these feelings dictate consequences, including mortality. That loneliness can predict how long you live really gets attention."

There's no escaping it: Loneliness has become a growing epidemic, seen as a symptom of or precursor to bigger issues including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, heart disease, stroke, cancer, drug addiction and alcoholism, as well as dementia and early death.

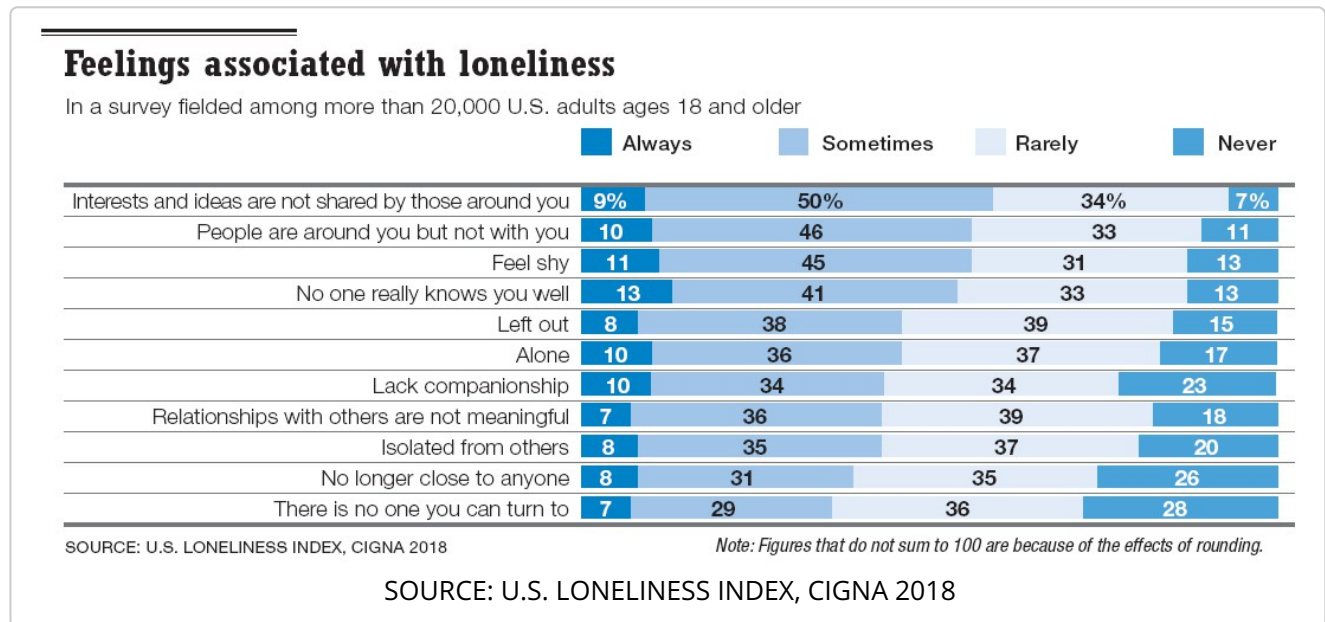
"The amount of students coming in for counseling increased exponentially over the last decade at USF," said Dr. Nicholas Joyce, a University of South Florida counselor who has developed workshops and other models for treating lonely students. "We've seen a 39 percent increase in the past five years [of students] coming in, 26 percent increase over the last year. There's been a 309 percent increase in hospitalizations over the last five years due to emotional behavioral issues."

How did we as a society get so lonely?

The revelation that students and, as has been brought to light, Millennials are suffering from acute loneliness has lent new understanding on the universal, widespread nature of the problem. Retired seniors we could wrap our heads around, especially in Florida where oftentimes they've not only separated from their work colleagues but have moved away

from friends and family. Failing health, limited mobility, physical isolation: All of these issues of aging clearly can lead to social isolation and its subjective handmaiden, loneliness.

But our young people going to school and in the ripeness of their careers? Surrounded by others their own age? Ensconced in party scenes and living in close quarters? Connected by social media?



Enter the tech irony

But wait, back up: Social media and technology in general are often blamed for actually contributing to the situation — the grand irony that today’s methods of connecting just may be achieving the opposite.

“There is no singular solution (to loneliness) but rather a behavioral shift — technology is great and needed but a shift to more meaningful use of technology is required, one that facilitates connection instead of increasing loneliness,” says Sarah Owen, president and CEO of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation.

The fix for loneliness, experts agree, lies not in being with, around and in communication with people but feeling a connection with them, feeling people care about them. Study after study points to technology and its effect on real social skills as just one more reason the problem spirals.

“They can be literally sitting in a dining hall full of students, but they’re on the phone,” said Dr. Joyce, who has counseled and studied students for 10 years in colleges across the country, six of those years at USF. “It’s not about physically being alone, but that connection.

They can be around others, yet the majority feel alone.” Thanks to the emotional sanctuary of their smart devices, young people are failing to equip their social skills tool box, he added.

“When I was in college, I’d just have to sit and exist, entertain myself or make conversation,” he said. “Now you pull out your phone. Before, being alone, I had to learn how to be alone. Young people don’t have to learn that skill.”

Sherry Turkle in her book “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other” draws a similar conclusion. “Loneliness is failed solitude,” she wrote. “To experience solitude you must be able to summon yourself by yourself; otherwise, you will only know how to be lonely.”

It’s not just the young who feel the social media disconnect, however.

“I try to stay connected through social media, but have found it to be a doubleedged sword,” wrote Marten Karlsson, 55, of Fort Myers, in response to the short loneliness survey in Florida Weekly. “You can stay connected with people even far away, but you also are reminded of activities that people do together and that you most of the time have to do by yourself.”

“One of the things that comes to feel safe is using technology to connect to people at a distance or more precisely to a lot of people from a distance,” wrote Turkle. “But even a lot of people at a distance can turn out not to be enough people at all.”

Not surprisingly, however, Facebook conducted its own study that concluded social media does not necessarily cause loneliness.

“A study we conducted with Robert Kraut at Carnegie Mellon University found that people who sent or received more messages, comments and Timeline posts reported improvements in social support, depression and loneliness,” stated a post by David Ginsberg, director of research, and Moira Burke, research scientist at Facebook. “The positive effects were even stronger when people talked with their close friends online. Simply broadcasting status updates wasn’t enough; people had to interact one-on-one with others in their network.”

The Cigna study, too, lightens the burden of blame so often laid on technology: “Social media use alone is not a predictor of loneliness; respondents defined as very heavy users of social media have a loneliness score (43.5) that is not markedly different from the score of those who never use social media (41.7).”

The bottom line, according to Psychology Today in December 2017: “Loneliness is on the rise. In 2010, roughly 40 percent of Americans reported feeling lonely on a regular basis, up from about 20 percent in the 1980s. According to the General Social Survey, an annual

report on the country's social characteristics, the number of Americans who say they have no one they can confide in nearly tripled between 1985 and 2004. Now, the average American reports zero close confidants." |



PART II | Who is lonely?

“All the lonely people Where do they all come from?”

— Eleanor Rigby by The Beatles

LIKE PEOPLE, LONELINESS COMES IN ALL shapes and forms. There's no one set description of what loneliness looks like or whom it affects how. That said, to greatly simplify, the lonely fall into two general categories. "There is life-stage transitional loneliness brought on by the death of a spouse, relocating, health issues," said Palm Beach Gardens psychotherapist and Florida Weekly columnist Linda Lipshutz. "Then there are people who, because of their personalities, experience a more pervasive loneliness. They have difficulty making a connection."

When Dr. Nicholas Joyce, staff psychologist at the University of South Florida in Tampa, talks about student loneliness, he is talking primarily about the latter category. He addresses shifting societal mores and technological dependence that have left our youth bereft of social skills and the confidence to connect and meet new people.

Across the country, survey data show that each year the percentage of students who claim to be "very lonely" climbs, reaching a current figure nationally of about 66 percent, he said.

"Young adults are still trying to form relationships," Dr. Joyce explained. "Before college, their friends were just people who were around. Then they come to college and are forced to make friends. They don't know how to do that anymore. They're not in a class, not part of a club, dealing with developmental changes and milestones. They don't have the skill set.

"Our public school system in general doesn't gear them up for that. It's about 'you've got to go to college.' Lots of brilliant, smart students lack social skills, when they're probably more important to a career than any knowledge."

Perhaps for the same reasons Generation Z (ages 18-22) has a high loneliness rate, Millennials (ages 23-37) often, too, rank themselves high on the loneliness scale, according to a study by global health service company Cigna in 2018, because Millennials grew up on the cusp of the technological boom.

Not surprisingly, many adults experience loneliness. The 45-49 age group scored highest in loneliness in a landmark AARP study, which surveyed 3,012 adults ages 45 and older across the nation in 2010. However, says Dr. Joyce, "theoretically, from a developmental standpoint, what young adults experience is different from older adults."



LIPSHUTZ

For most older adults, loss or other major changes in their lives send their connectivity into a tailspin.

The Florida equation

Almost half of those who had lived in their current residence for less than one year reported feeling lonely, according to the AARP "Loneliness Among Older Adults: A National Survey of Adults 45+." In Florida, the fabled land of the retiree, relocation is a way of life. The reward may be pleasant climates and improved mobility, but the downside often brings isolation from family and a lifetime network of friends.

Besides the emotional upheaval and isolation, older adults and sociologists alike point to the physical reality of newer Florida communities.

"Residential and/or commercial building laws make for a spread-out community," wrote Jacobina Trump, 62, from Englewood, in response to the Florida Weekly Loneliness survey that ran in newspapers. "If living, shopping and hanging out would be closer to one another there would be a more automatic social life. In my mind it is a matter of building brick and mortar communities."

Dr. Thomas P. Felke, Department of Social Work chair at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, backs up Ms. Trump's hunch. "They're coming from up North, where there was a strong sense of community engagement," he said. "Here, gated communities are designed with an amenities mindset, not a community mindset. There are pools and clubhouses, but what are you doing at the community pool and clubhouses ... to bring the community together?"

Art Sturm, 87, has found, however, that the particular gated community where he lives in Naples, Village Walk, fulfills some of his needs for engagement by offering bingo, cards, swimming and exercise activities. He complements those activities with a number of programs he attends usually four days a week at the Naples Senior Center.

In 2012, the Leadership Coalition on Aging in Collier County engaged Dr. Felke's department to assess the needs of older adults in the greater Naples area with a vision to establish a first-of-its-kind senior center. While stakeholders whom they interviewed blamed the



Dr. Jaclynn Faffer, president/CEO, Naples Senior Center.

disconnect on transportation, the older adults themselves were on the opposite side of the fence. They didn't want to take buses to get around. They wanted places they could drive or walk to and be around people like themselves.

As a result, the Naples Senior Center opened five years ago to serve the needs of older adults in Collier and southern Lee counties. What began as a membership of 80 has swelled to 1,600 and a capital campaign to expand the facility.

Mary Chen, age 71, had moved to Naples four years ago after living 41 years in Potomac, Md. Her husband is away from home much of the time, working and traveling. When she heard from a friend how the Naples Senior Center had helped improve her mobility through exercise programs, Ms. Chen showed up there the very next day.

"I was a nurse for 41 years, and I know they do a great job," she said. "Now I go there almost every day. I've met a lot of nice people, and we go out together. It is a blessing that Naples has such a place."

Besides older adults suffering from health problems, the Naples Senior Center identified another important segment of loneliness victims.

"We have the only dementia respite program to give caregivers a break," said Dr. Jaclynn Faffer, president and CEO of the center. "When you become a caregiver — particularly when it involves a social disability — your social circle begins to shrink."

Fixing loneliness

By most accounts, transitional loneliness has its fixes.

"There's an antidote to loneliness, and that's connecting with others," said Dr. Faffer. "(Loneliness is) short term when it is addressed. Data we collect show that the majority come because they want to make friends. When they get involved in our programs, within six months, they report they're not feeling lonely."

Experts are quick to point out that having people around you is no safeguard against loneliness. Even in relationships, connections are often broken. Even "the life of the party" can feel lonely. In both cases, the fear of being alone and abandoned underlies an overeagerness to be with someone in a relationship but also an inability to make true connections.



"I have a girlfriend who lives with me since a couple of years, but who works much different shifts than I do, and I spend most of my time off alone," wrote Marten Karlsson, 55, who divorced a spouse of more than 30 years after moving to Fort Myers to try to "rejuvenate a troubled marriage."

"In our society, we're told to be a couple in a relationship. If not, something is wrong and (you think) it must be wrong with you," said Rick Merillat, a marriage counselor in Cape Coral, who points out that marriage is no hedge against loneliness.

The Naples Senior Center schedules affordable social/recreational activities such as art classes, movie afternoons, luncheons and games; and provides emotional support services to combat loneliness in older adults.

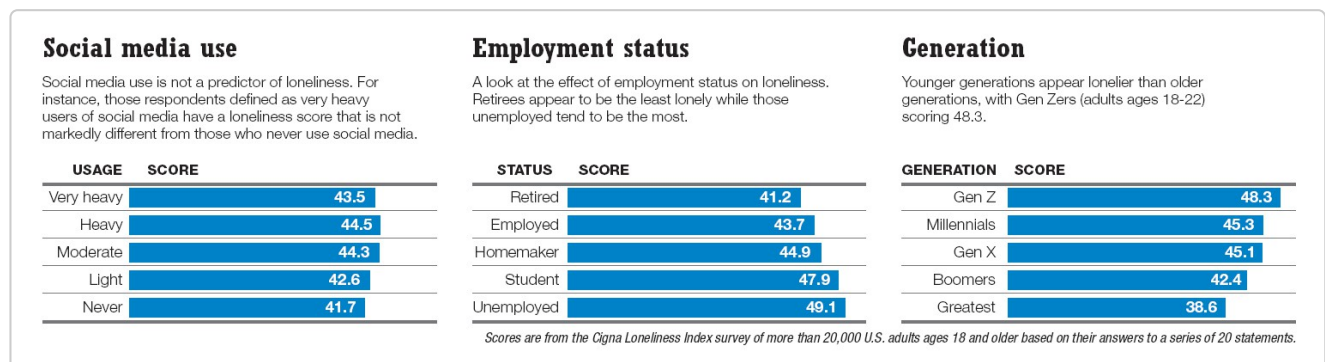
"If you don't have the programming, (a facility) doesn't really matter," said Dr. Felke, who believes engagement is key to the success of easing loneliness. "The fact is people make connections with what they're involved in."

The Happiness Club of Palm Beach works on much the same principle, offering wellness programs, parties and speakers on happiness through travel and choice. "This is very easy," said facilitator Melanie Cabot. "They don't have to identify themselves as lonely. They can just come and have a lovely evening. It's not a commitment, not a financial commitment, just \$20. It's not something heavy."

When long-term loneliness prevails as a mental condition, "I tell patients how to think differently about one's state," said Ms. Lipshutz, the Palm Beach Gardens psychotherapist. "That therapy may involve mental health counseling and support."

Still, even when emotional behavioral issues exist, building a community is key, says James Wineinger, executive director of Hope Clubhouse of SW Florida.

Its model program for persons suffering from loneliness due to mental illness is "almost more like a work place than anything that would look like group therapy," he said. "It's people working together on a common goal on a regular basis to build a relationship with those people. The real cure for loneliness is strong relationships — supportive, productive relationships, friends, families." ;



Scores are from the Cigna Loneliness Index survey of more than 20,000 U.S. adults ages 18 and older based on their answers to a series of 20 statements.

Who else is lonely?

More facts from the 2010 AARP study:

7 in 10 who say they are lonely do not attribute their loneliness to a single incident.

51 percent of the lonely have never been married, compared to 60 percent of the not-lonely responders who have been married or are living with a partner. Forty-six percent of divorced or separated survey responders claimed loneliness, indicating that the first nine years are the worst.

People with lower incomes are more likely to be lonely — 31 percent in the \$50K-\$74.9K and over \$75K brackets as opposed to 50 percent in the under \$25K category.

Midlife and older adults in poor health (67 percent).

People suffering anxiety and depression.

PART III

The
loneliness
EPIDEMIC

What is being done?



Elaine Pomfrey of Palm Beach Gardens became involved with the Happiness Club in Palm Beach.

PART III | What is being done?

“Are you lonesome tonight?”

— Elvis

ENGLAND HAS MADE MAJOR STRIDES Addressing loneliness by appointing a minister of loneliness and with small gestures, such as “The Happy To Chat” benches police in a seaside town have designated.

“The Chat Bench is a very simple concept where a sign is placed on a bench, typically in a park or a town centre, in a location used by a good cross-section of the community,” [Yahoo.com](#) quoted Burnham-On-Sea Police Community Support Officer Tracey Grobbeler.

Signs on the benches read: “The ‘Happy to Chat’ Bench: Sit Here If You Don’t Mind Someone Stopping To Say Hello.”

As for Minister of Loneliness Tracey Crouch: “Our strategy sets out a powerful vision for addressing this generational challenge. By bringing together health services, businesses, local authorities, charities and community groups we will raise awareness of loneliness and help people build connections to lead happier and healthier lives,” she decreed in May 2018.

Awareness seems to be ground zero, a first step in moving toward solutions. It is being accomplished around the world with myriad studies, conference focusing, websites, social and traditional media coverage. A number of loneliness groups have cropped up on Facebook, and www.antiloneliness.com promises “counseling to defeat loneliness,” with online workshops, support groups and email newsletters.

Across the U.S., services such as Meet- Up.com and Well Connected ([covia.org/ services/well-connected](http://covia.org/services/well-connected)) are filling a practical need for uniting the lonely through relationships, or at least to other voices.

Well Connected launched in 2004 as Senior Center Without Walls — a conference line for six women in Oakland, Calif. It now counts 1,500 participants across 41 states.

“It was really about connecting people who weren’t able to connect in person,” said director Amber Carroll. The nonprofit offers a catalog of free programs on topics from Pet Tales to Unpacking Your “Griefcase” for participants who call in at scheduled times. Discussions lead to connections that have led to friendships and even networks that meet face-to-face on their own, said Ms. Carroll.

The Florida picture

Fewer than a dozen Florida residents participate in the Well Connected program, most of them in metropolitan areas. However, a number of agencies and nonprofits in South Florida have formed to address loneliness, mostly among older adult populations. Although national statistics show young adults ages 18 to 22 to be the loneliest demographic, here in Florida, a large retired, aging population skews those figures somewhat.



Christina Corbett ponders steps on combatting loneliness with happiness programs offered.

"I absolutely feel that the characteristics of our population have a profound effect on the statistics," said FGCU's Dr. Thomas Felke, who has conducted needs-based studies of older adults in Collier County and in one south Fort Myers neighborhood. "We have heard these stories from older adults in our focus groups."

Anti-loneliness has become a priority in the Naples area, where the Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida strives for the well being of the community. Volunteering, an important tenet of the initiative, happens to be one of the most often-named antidotes for loneliness.

"Once I've worked (with a lonely patient) and let them vent, I encourage them to expand their life," said Palm Beach Gardens psychotherapist Linda Lipshutz. "One good way is by giving oneself to other people, volunteering at a hospital or animal shelter. Animal lovers can walk doggies and kittens at a shelter, where they can meet other like-minded people and have that animal connection of warmth."

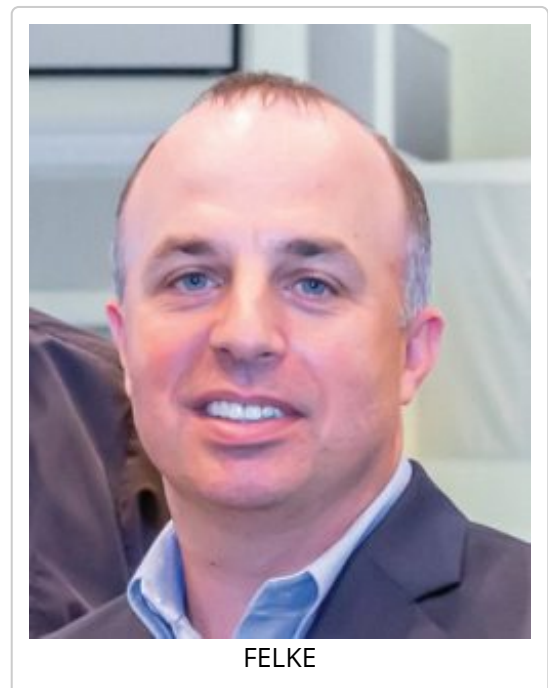
The Naples community took it a step further by commissioning a study of senior needs, which resulted in the Naples Senior Center and later the Golden Gate Senior Center.

"Our primary goal is to help these individuals connect and create a sense of community, to become a portal," said Dr. Jaclynn Faffer, president and CEO of the Naples Senior Center.

Dr. Felke, chair of the Department of Social Work at FGCU, led the study Dr. Faffer commissioned in 2012. A few years later, he ran a "check-in" study with those who were attending the senior center.

"The recurring theme was how grateful (the older adults) were for establishments like this, so they had someplace to go," he said. "That the staff cared for them and loved them. That level of care and affection."

"It's such a social, friendly place to go, and the staff seems to really care about everything going on with you," said Naples Senior Center member June Bialecki, a 75-year-old widow. "And it's very affordable for me, now that I have just one income."



FELKE

"The majority come because they want to make friends," said Dr. Faffer. "When they get involved in the programs, within six months, they report they're not feeling lonely."

Dr. Felke completed his second study this summer for Peace Lutheran Church in the Iona area of south Fort Myers. It had already initiated exercise and Alzheimer's programs open free to its congregation and anyone in the community.

"Your geographic area here within a five-mile radius is the exact type of location where a senior access center should be located," Dr. Felke told a group gathered in mid-August to hear the results of his study. He reported that more than 57,000 adults ages 60 and older live within that radius year-round.

Of course, in season, those numbers swell and that too affects the year-rounders' loneliness: "Their seasonal friends are here and then are gone, and the full-year residents miss them and feel lonely as a result," said Dr. Felke.

"Loneliness has been our first priority," said parish nurse Marilyn S. Kranich. "Especially with men. We've been seeing it for many years. They're reluctant to join in, but it's so important to stimulate the brain to ward off depression and dementia."

"God has planted Peace Church in an area with many seniors," said Pastor Walter Still. "They share with us their joys and sorrows and interest in making new friends and learning. The folks are a great gift and we wish to find ways to share meaning and fun to their lives."

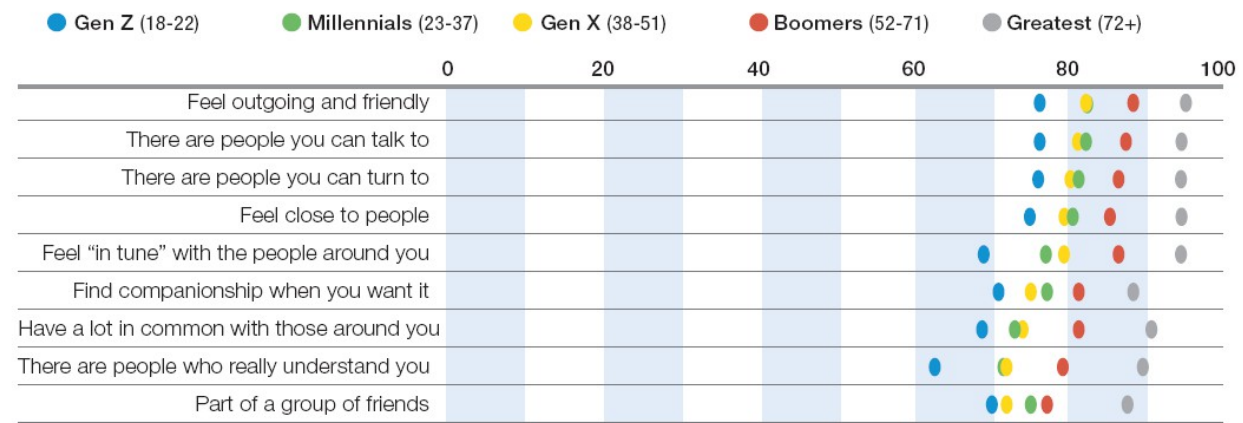
The Happiness Club of Palm Beach approaches the often stigmatic problem of loneliness from the other direction — by teaching its participants about being happy and making connections. "We don't directly deal with the issue of loneliness, it's sort of in the background," said facilitator Melanie Cabot. "The big thing is a sense of community, knowing you're not all on your own."

She sees mostly 40- to 70-year-olds attending her monthly after-work meetings. The nonprofit social group has chapters throughout the world. "Here you can make friends face-to-face," she said. "They're not sitting at home scrolling for fake friends."

Also in the Palm Beach area, Compass targets loneliness in the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) context. The Lake Worth community center has members of every generation, particularly the young, who are coming to terms with their sexual orientation.

Who's not feeling lonely?

Older generations are the most likely to experience feelings associated with not being lonely.



SOURCE: U.S. LONELINESS INDEX, CIGNA 2018

SOURCE: U.S. LONELINESS INDEX, CIGNA 2018

"I always wanted to go along with this transition, but was worried, what if the world won't understand?" said Lauren Gayle, 28, who visited Compass out of loneliness when he was contemplating a transgender procedure from female to male earlier this year. "The loneliness comes from just trying to fit into society for a very long time."

Executive Director Julie Seaver also finds loneliness prevalent in older members. She started a free monthly Coffee Klatch that has become popular, mostly among older gay men.

"Just talking amongst yourself about anything, or nothing," Ms. Seaver explained. "I think everyone experiences loneliness in their lives, but I realize why LGBT people would experience it more, because discrimination leads to isolation." Her Coffee Klatch program has effectively broken isolation barriers, with up to 80 people attending each month.

Such facilities and programs are proving that bringing people together to share hobbies, ideas and interests can help those suffering from transitional loneliness caused by a move, physical isolation, the loss of a loved one, bad health or financial setbacks.

In Fort Myers, Hope Clubhouse of SW Florida helps those whose loneliness is seated in mental illness. "Our cure for loneliness is to build a community," said James Wineinger, executive director. "We start with the smaller community — Hope Clubhouse — to reconnect with larger community — Fort Myers." The organization helps its community members find employment within and outside of Hope Clubhouse, part of an international model. It also arranges social gatherings, particularly during holiday periods, which are the toughest times for the lonely.

"I think of loneliness as a symptom of a dozen different disorders," Mr. Wineinger said, depression and anxiety being the big ones.

Reaching, teaching students

Loneliness in college students stems largely from behavioral issues, indicated Dr. Nicholas Joyce, staff psychologist at the University of South Florida in Tampa.

“The top three things we treat are anxiety, depression and relationship difficulties — all connected to loneliness — not feeling connected, socially anxious, fundamentally unhappy,” he said. “Not many say, ‘I’m lonely,’ it stigmatizes. They say, ‘I’m unhappy,’ and then we do an assessment of family and the social picture. It becomes clear if they’re spending all their time in their dorm room ... Loneliness is a symptom of young people not equipped to handle life stressors.”

Dr. Joyce, who has worked at three other universities during his 10 years as a college psychologist, has developed four-session workshops that teach students crucial life skills — mindfulness, openness, values and engagement.

The program, which he recently presented at a national conference in San Diego, helps students “learn to deal with life,” Dr. Joyce said. “We bring up anxieties — academic or socially based, the two main things. They have to learn skills by making connections.”

Connections. Community. Caring. If there is such a thing as a cure for loneliness, and if we listen to the experts, it lies in those three C’s.

But what, exactly, are the lonely people saying they need to fix their loneliness? †

What more needs to be done?



Art Sturm moved to Naples in April to be near his daughter. Because she frequently is away, he got a golf cart and hired a driver, who also has proven to be a companion.

PART IV | What more needs to be done?

“That’s why I’m lonely, I’m Mr. Lonely. I wish that I could go back home.”

— Mr. Lonely Bobby Vinton

"I DON'T FEEL READY TO BE IN A SENIOR center yet. I would join a group that meets on the issue of loneliness and sadness and fears of getting older. I would join a gym if it had something like that." — Nina Nangle, 74, Boynton Beach

"I just would like to be able to relax and talk to somebody without explaining myself." — Jacobina Trump, 62, Englewood

"I would consider joining a singles event depending on how it was structured and targeted. I'm not looking for a 'meat market' type of encounter, because loneliness is often only made worse in such a superficial situation. I think an event geared more toward earnest discussion would be of value, and ... professionals (or moderators or facilitators) would be excellent to help people open up and feel more comfortable discussing such a difficult subject." — Lisa (last name withheld), 63, Lehigh Acres

"My true hopes and desires is to find a true companion for me after I break the cycle of attaining abusive relationships." — Denise (name and age withheld), Lake Worth Beach

"It is so sad that in today's society so many of us are alone, when if there were easier ways to meet new people, this doesn't have to be true." — Hillary, (name withheld) 60, Naples

"I think people need to put away their phones more and reach out to other — NOT Reach out by phone but personally face to face if possible. I truly believe the digital age has isolated us more from God, from others, and from ourselves even." — Carol Serna, 62, Jupiter

"I think it would be helpful to have targeted talks about loneliness and professionals to help learn how to cope with issues related to loneliness.... an effort to address this an initiative at a government level would be something to consider at least." — Marten Karlsson, 55, Fort Myers

"Gathering in a group setting would provide some safety for me.... There's not an easy fix for everybody." — Chris, (name withheld) 70, Fort Myers

This is the same Chris we talked about at the beginning of this section. The Chris who changed the direction of our focus in this loneliness project to proactive. She challenged us to help find solutions, rather than just passively reporting. She wondered why Publix grocery stores, gyms, doctor's offices and other places that older adults frequent don't step up to



Mary Chen's husband frequently is out of town for work. To avoid feeling lonely, she attends programs at Naples Senior Center, where she practices tai chi and volunteers with a dementia respite group.

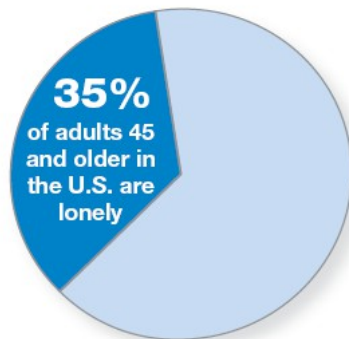
the plate. She engaged her therapist at Genesis Counseling of Fort Myers, who has agreed to allow the use of its conference room for loneliness support group meetings. She suggested we at Florida Weekly arrange a social event for everyone who got involved in this long, twisting project from coast-to-coast in Florida.

Florida Weekly began this project in March, running an ad in all of its Florida editions asking, "Are You Lonely?" We asked readers to answer five questions about their loneliness and send them to us via email or mail. In later communications with them, we asked the question: What could/should your community and community groups do to alleviate your loneliness? Above are some of the answers we received.

Global efforts

Forty-five and older

A survey identifying loneliness among midlife and older U.S. adults used two direct measures: the UCLA loneliness scale, which includes 20 items designed to assess subjects feelings of loneliness, and a single measure, which asked, "Overall, how often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?"



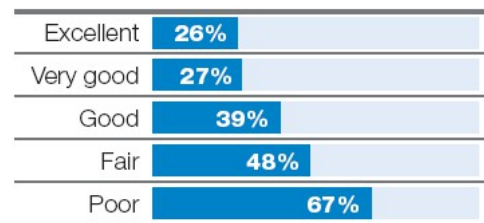
SOURCES: LONELINESS AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF ADULTS 45 AND OLDER — AARP.ORG; U.S. LONELINESS INDEX, CIGNA

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Health

There appears to be a clear connection between health and the rate of loneliness. Half (51%) of midlife and older adults who consider their health to be fair or poor are lonely in contrast to 27 percent who believe their health to be excellent or very good.

Percentage of midlife and older adults who are lonely by overall health.



Do we need a minister of loneliness? Or at least government agencies at the state or municipal level?

Aside from the UK's all-in approach, we found examples of other communities and organizations thinking creatively to find solutions.

In Los Angeles County, California, for instance, the Motion Picture Television Fund, with support from AARP, established a Social Isolation and Loneliness Impact Coalition made up of community factions. It strives to broaden and promote existing programs "addressing social isolation and loneliness by creating a community response to the health and financial impact of social isolation," reported the American Society on Aging.

Certain colleges and universities have initiated programs where older adults living alone and isolated provide affordable housing for graduate students in spare spaces in their homes, thereby easing the loneliness for both parties.

“Promising future approaches may include: public health initiatives to create accepting communities, better designed psychological intervention studies, greater use of digital technology and programmes to link people with supportive social activities, and opportunities within local communities,” concluded a paper titled “A life less lonely: the state of the art in interventions to reduce loneliness in people with mental health problems” published May 2017 in an online psychiatric journal.

It recommends that loneliness should become a higher priority for public health officials and that large community organizations facilitate socialization, especially among older adults: “Groups that appeal to a wider range of members, with or without mental health problems, may facilitate better integration, reduce stigma, and boost one’s confidence as a member of wider society.”

Local efforts

Inspired by the advice that large community organizations should step in to provide socializing opportunities easily accessible to the lonely, we talked to community foundations around Florida Weekly’s circulation areas. None could point to any specific initiatives that target the lonely in their communities.

Sarah Owen, president and CEO of the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, did offer advice on how communities could implement an overarching policy to address loneliness. “Every time we design a project, program in our community we should put it behind the loneliness lens,” she says. “What could we do intentionally, cross generationally, etc. that addresses this? When is the last time we asked a question in a meeting: are we contributing to isolation or are we promoting connectivity?”

Melanie Cabot, director of the Happiness Club of Palm Beach, offers pointers for organizations or businesses that wish to arrange social events where lonely people can safely and unashamedly find one another.

But we are still left with the questions: Where to start the conversation? Who will start the conversation? Will it be your church? Your doctor’s office? Your grocery store or restaurant? Will it be you?

Florida Weekly starts the dialogue here, but where will we take it? We take it to where we started, reaching out to community. This time, instead of asking Are You Lonely? we are asking What Are You Doing about Loneliness? Whether you are battling loneliness on a personal or community level, we want to hear from you.

Email us at lonely@floridaweekly.com and let us know about your ideas and efforts. We will follow up with an article commending any proactivity we hear from you. We will showcase businesses and organizations that have asked how they can become involved and put ideas into action. Together, we will strive to confront loneliness and isolation by encouraging community-wide connectivity through the printed word. †

In the KNOW

Tips for hosting social meetups

Melanie Cabot, director of the Happiness Club of Palm Beach, an educational, nonprofit social group with the mission to promote the benefits of being happy, offers suggestions.

1. Set regular dates and times for your meetings. The Happiness Club meets monthly in Palm Beach on the first Monday of every month and at the same venue. Consistency encourages greater attendance.
2. Never underestimate the power of a smile and a warm welcome. Guests want to join and make new friends, connect with old friends, chat and share experiences. Make them feel welcome!
3. Recruit a cohost to assist in welcoming guests and circulate to encourage introductions. Collect guest contact information for those who wish to receive notifications of future events.
4. Encourage guests to come early to meet and greet. Have a few refreshments if appropriate for the venue. Set up the venue seating to facilitate small groups and encourage conversations. Avoid a set-up with rows of chairs or a large circle around the perimeter of the room.
5. Have a few ice-breakers to facilitate conversations, for example fun facts related to the speaker and topics on postcards or business card size (we use store brand business cards and postcard templates to print handouts).
6. We invite guest speakers from the community to tell their stories and share how, when faced with experiences beyond their control, they made happiness a choice and bounced back from setbacks. Our speakers inspire us with their powerful and often entertaining stories about the challenges they overcame.
7. Allow time for questions after the speaker's presentation. Manage the meeting to end on time.

8. We close our meetings with a thank-you to speakers for sharing their wisdom, and thank the audience for attending. Finally we hold a raffle with donated gifts from members and the speakers — usually their book if they have one or a complimentary coaching session. Announce the next meeting details.



EPILOGUE | Portraits of the lonely

“I’m sad and lonely.”

— I Ain’t Got Nobody Louis Armstrong

EARLIER THIS YEAR FLORIDA WEEKLY PUBLISHED A SHORT survey for several months in its newspapers. Some of these stories are from those responses, which were returned by email or letter. Some respondents asked that their full names not be used.



The Naples Senior Center offers a variety of programs, such as this exercise group. COURTESY PHOTO

Lauren Gayle 28, Jupiter

When we spoke with Lauren this fall, he had begun hormone treatment to transition from identifying female to transgender male. The decision and the relief of being able to tell family and friends about it has eased a loneliness pattern he had suffered since middle school.

“The ... loneliness comes from just trying to fit into society for a very long time,” says Lauren. “I wasn’t in the right body, wasn’t the right person. That creates a lot of loneliness because I don’t get to experience the same things my family and friends are. Even though I had friends, it still felt lonely when they were talking about having crushes and coming into their bodies. That to me felt lonely because no one else was going through the same things I was.

“The one thing I always feared: What if people don’t want to be friends with me anymore or talk to me anymore when they find out.”

With the help and support of counselors at Compass, an LGBT community center in Lake Worth Beach, Lauren was able to first talk to her mother about it. That, he said, was when her loneliness started waning, as his mother stood behind his decision.

“I’m starting to feel comfortable talking about it,” he says. “At the LGBT community center I’ve been meeting other people going through what I’m going through.”

That has given Lauren the courage to tell his friends he works with at Home Depot as a department supervisor. Except for a couple of religious family members, the support has been bolstering, Lauren says. "I started coming out of that loneliness hole and started being proud of who I am."

Marten Karlsson, 55, Fort Myers

"My sense of loneliness is present most of the time, except while engaged with others at work. Or when my girlfriend is available to do something together," wrote Marten, who immigrated on his own from Scandinavia as a teen. "I think the main cause of loneliness is lack of social network outside of work."

Married for more than 30 years, he moved to the area five years ago in hopes "to rejuvenate a troubled marriage." His ex-wife moved north, his sons live overseas, and his parents and siblings still reside in Europe. He lives with his girlfriend, but she works different shifts, so Marten often finds himself alone after work.

"I have tried to join different meetup groups, I say yes whenever I am invited to some event or get-together. I am somewhat of an introvert and think that contributes to the problem ... I also try to become comfortable with myself; read, listen to music, exercise, go to events by myself, eat out by myself, and find it to be better than sitting alone at home much of the time."

"I think a lot of people are lonely, especially as they get older, and this affects both mental and physical health."

Lisa 63, Lehigh Acres

"Much as I hate to admit it, my loneliness is a constant state," wrote Lisa. "Much more so in the past few years, due primarily to the utter hideousness of the ever-present political climate."

Lisa explained the reason for her loneliness is multifold. Never married, with no children, she also lives in a remote area with few neighbors. She is physically and socially isolated from her siblings.

"If digging a bit deeper, however, the main cause of my loneliness is likely attributable to something much more complex. If I had to filter it down to one thing, I'd be inclined to say that I am a black woman who looks white, I grew up during the very turbulent and very bitter Civil Rights era, I am blessedly well-educated and the daughter of a surgeon (and believe me, many people at that time — and even at this time? — were incensed that any black person could dare to be so "uppity"!), and my entire life has been spent feeling like an anomaly, even a freak."

She suffers from an inner struggle to stand up for herself and her race when people make disparaging remarks, not realizing she is African-American, and saying nothing. When she does admit to her ethnicity, "I then brace myself for the inevitable shocked look, the litany of questions, and the palpable 'pull-back.'

"If I don't say anything, usually because I'm simply just not up to dealing with the inevitable bullshit, I later become angry at myself for not speaking up and missing out on an opportunity to educate someone. As a result, I usually just tend to keep to myself and rarely trust people."

To combat her loneliness, she throws herself into her work and visits with her "few friends."

"And I heavily rely on my faith and spirituality, recognizing that the challenge of loneliness is teaching me something I may not yet realize, but I know it is leading me to a greater good."

Mary Chen 71, Naples

After Mary and her husband moved to Naples from Maryland, she heard about the Naples Senior Center from a friend who told her she could hardly walk before she joined. The center's exercise programs helped get her back upright.

"The next day, Monday, I went," she says. "I like it very much. They have a lot of different kinds of programs that are helpful. I've been a nurse for 41 years and I know what is good."

Mary's husband works a lot and travels overseas regularly, leaving her alone and often lonely. Now she participates in tai chi and socials and volunteers with the dementia respite group.

"I go there every day," she says. "I've met a lot of nice people, made good friends and we go out together."

Jacobina Trump 62, Englewood

"My feelings become stronger every year when the snowbirds leave and there is an overall feeling of emptiness," Jacobina wrote in June. "The last week it has been constant, every day and I cannot seem to shake it."

Jacobina says she works long hours and keeps herself busy to try to alleviate her loneliness. She is considering a dating website or traveling up north "to where the people are." She said she once tried [Match.com](https://www.match.com), but was disappointed with the "good-looking guy" she met because "He had no passion, did not want to put effort in anything else in life and I had the feeling he only was waiting for a woman to make him happy."

"I don't like singles events because they are geared up to focus on a negative thing called loneliness. I don't want to focus on it. So I would not join such event. I would love to anticipate on growing a sense of community and brainstorm how that would look like."

"As painful as it is, we need to stand still with the emotion of loneliness, which is a mindset after all. I think the lack of knowledge of who we are and what kind of relationship nourishes us is at the bottom of this."

Montai Watford 29, West Palm Beach

"I feel the main cause of my loneliness stems from FEAR," wrote Montai, who lives alone and combats loneliness by volunteering, networking, using social media and "worshipping my God."

"Years after I separated myself from toxic friends and domestic family members, I realized I would soon have to figure out which direction I should take social-wise. I began to analyze my character. My flaws the issues I had learned from in the past and so on. I thought to myself maybe it was me that caused the drama and heartache. Maybe I needed to work on me a little bit more before I was able to dwell in different groups around the community ...

"I thought I'd be better off as a loner. When love strikes I'll just make sure I'm fit to handle the atmosphere."

Fabiana Solano 21, Florida Gulf Coast University

Fabiana had just come off of a seven-year relationship when she found herself alone for two long summer months at FGCU with no classes or friends to keep her busy between graduation and the start of graduate school.

"It was basically the lowest point in my life," she said. "I felt I needed to learn how to be lonely for the first time of my life. It's something I didn't even think about before as a busy student. I felt lost."

Fabiana took a proactive approach to her loneliness. "You have to realize you're the only company you're always going to have. I had to get comfortable with that. I started doing little things. First, I started a journal and wrote down one good thing that happened that day. I played really happy music every morning whether I was feeling it or not. I forced myself, I tried to stay busy with little projects. I started a puzzle that took all summer. I tried to be with people, hang out and do stuff I would not normally do. I put myself out there."

Rather than resort to social media, Fabiana did the opposite: "I turned off all notifications. I felt social media was a pit. I didn't want to see what everyone else was doing."

She said she still experiences bouts of loneliness, but she has taught herself how to handle them. "You have to remind yourself that it's temporary. I've learned to love myself more. It was hard learning no one was there for me but myself, that I was the only one who understood how I felt."

Denise, Lake Worth

"I feel that my main cause of loneliness is my depression where I tend to isolate myself, and the lack of understanding and connection I have with others," Denise wrote. "I just broke up with my ex-boyfriend, whom I believed would help me with this loneliness ... I blame my loneliness for choosing such an erroneous partner. I felt lonely in the relationship and feel lonelier now."

Although Denise has a seven year-old daughter, she describes her loneliness as constant, "every moment of the day." She tries to find distractions watching Netflix, cleaning and caring for her daughter.

"However, it hardly masks it, because I feel it as I am doing things, and end up bursting into sobs out of nowhere. However, I just tell myself to cry it out, and keep going. My daughter is so use to it that she just brings me tissue and continues to play along with her toys."

June Bialecki 75, Naples

"One of main things to not being lonely is being active," said June, whose husband died two years ago. "You have to put yourself out there, and that's what the Naples Senior Center does. It is a safe, friendly atmosphere for exercising and socializing."

June participates in tai chi, line dancing and other exercising classes, plus enjoys classes on learning to bird and write. She participates in providing entertainment for the center's lunches and also at her condo community. She particularly enjoys the senior center's gatherings arranged according to zip codes, so she can meet others who live around her.

"Sure I get lonely," June says. "At the senior center, I can meet my peers and be able to talk to them. I've made friends who help me deal with the loss of my husband. For me, personally, I love it."

"It would be nice if more places would have single senior activities. Activities in Naples aren't geared toward singles."

Dina Nangle 74, Boynton Beach

"When weekends come, I get very depressed," said Dina, who keeps herself busy during the week with intense workouts and taking care of her grandchildren. "I can cry all weekend."

"The people I meet at the gym are very young. I have close family ties, but I don't like to impose myself on them. They have their lives, but I don't. Other seniors don't have the same interests as I do," said Dina, divorced after 15 years of marriage. "Have dealt with depression/ anxiety on & off for most of my life. Antidepressants were tried but many many side effects! "

Dina has tried meditation and therapy: "I don't want to talk about my childhood anymore. I don't want to try those things anymore because I have a fear of failure again."

Chris 70, Fort Myers

"As a child, I was an incest victim," said Chris. "My father and mother were drunks, then I married a drunk." She admits that past abusive relationships, though she has worked through them during two-and-a-half years of therapy, has made her less than eager to seek new relationships, especially sexual relationships.

"Isolation hurts less than being used and abused," she said. "I keep my circle small." She makes contact over lunch with work colleagues at her part-time job and has a couple of close friends and "one good neighbor," plus a daughter and son-in-law in town. "They're my backbone."

Chris moved to Fort Myers in 1990 while still married to her husband. Once she divorced 24 years ago, "I lost my social circle and I don't know how to pick it up and recover it."

"I have a desire to fix (my loneliness). I would like to meet a handful of people. I'm not the only one out there like this."

Art Sturm 87, Naples

After losing his wife of 61 years in April 2019, Art moved to Naples to live with his daughter and her husband. Most of the time he's at the gated community home by himself with his dog.

"First of all when I got down here with my dog, my daughter would drive me around," he said. His daughter, an actor, moves around for work. "It was kind of lonely. I was on verge of tears thousands of times. She decided I had to get out."

He got a golf cart to get around his gated community and hired a driver to take him to the Naples Senior Center and on errands. "She's also my dietitian and a nurse," Art says. "She's expert on keeping me from going off the deep end ... She's saved me untold number of times."

Art socializes at his community's town hall and at the senior center. "You've got to push yourself to be active sometimes. You have to take the bull by the horns."

“Sometimes, when you’re in a deep depression, you just want to be left alone.” During his alone time, and when he can’t sleep at night, he writes novels. †

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