

Hello Walls

For all the commercial hype of merry and happy, and as all sizes and shapes of "family" try to wriggle into the cultural one-size that's supposed to fit all, for many members of the over-the-hill gang Yuletide can turn out to be more mono than ménage. For a variety of reasons (treacherous travel, illness, family dynamics, loss of a spouse) it can be a lonely time of year for older people living on their own when family doesn't show up and the usual hubbub is replaced by one hand clapping. In fact, growing older, if you buy into the hype, is guaranteed to be an increasingly solitary and lonely experience. But it doesn't need to be.

First of all, don't believe all the articles on the life-shortening effects of too much alone time when you're older. Sure, there are seismic shifts that take place later in life, often resulting in a more solitary way of life, but loneliness is not an unavoidable by-product. Plus, it turns out oldsters aren't the kings and queens of forsaken, so we can let go of that coveted notion. At what age (20? 40? 60? 70?) would you say Americans are most lonely? What's your guess? I was surprised by what I found. According to a 2020 study out of the University of California, San Diego, Americans are [most lonely in their 20s](#) and least in their 60s.

Sure, it's true. When we're older, living alone can lead to social isolation and that can lead to loneliness, but others can feel lonely without being socially isolated, such as the 20-year-olds in the study, and still others can be socially isolated and happy as clams. So, what's the connection? And what to do about lonely besides getting a puppy?

In his recent New York Times column, "I Live Alone. Really, I'm Not That Pathetic," Frank Bruni makes a case for his choice to live "uncoupled, in a house for one." He's not one bit lonely. One in every four households in the U.S. is occupied by [someone living alone](#). Some resist it, some celebrate it. I think the operative here is choice. How you feel about being alone is largely dependent on whether you happened to it, not it to you; you don't feel bushwhacked by unanticipated events, recently or over a lifetime; you actively choose to be the architect of your days, feel a sense of control. Then flying solo becomes a pleasure, a freedom.

In point of fact, we can't really control anything. We know this. But it sure feels better when we think we can. Those living-alone who have made, for example, a Holiday Plan B feel ready, if need be, for only one stocking hung by the fire with care if, for the reasons listed above, no one shows up. Looking at the road reports, I will write one for myself just in case, to get out ahead of the ambush. Skiing that day would be a fine option. Those who pro-actively anticipate moving into, say, assisted living or to a different community to be closer to children as they age, and are strategic about what the decision implies, will feel more in charge, less isolated by the decision, less lonely than those who feel they had no purchase on the process.

But what if you didn't anticipate an only holiday and, post-ambush, find yourself on your own and it was never your plan and worms start to seem a fine substitute for the traditional rib roast or Hanukkah brisket? But seriously, in a larger sense, as the result of unanticipated life events, what if you feel emotionally stranded on a desert island? How, after the fact, can you get out ahead of it?

To ward off lonely, how about taking the perspective that living alone, long or short term, is like any other relationship. It has its ups and downs, requires discipline, planning, love, commitment, imagination, forgiveness, compassion and flexibility. Couples often struggle to find time for themselves in the space of a day, a few precious moments of quiet. Those living on their own have the opposite challenge—building into their day what couples often have too much of: socialization, people. (Although I have friends who guard their hard-won solitude like it's gold.)

Earlier in this piece I wrote that we can't control anything. I was wrong. We can control our thoughts. Alone is what you think of it, freeing or lonesome. Here's to the metaphorical one stocking by the fire if it's your choice. If it's not, here's to the robust manifestation of Plan B. May this holiday season be the one you choose, and in the meantime, send some cheer in the direction of a 20-something. They just might be feeling lonely.