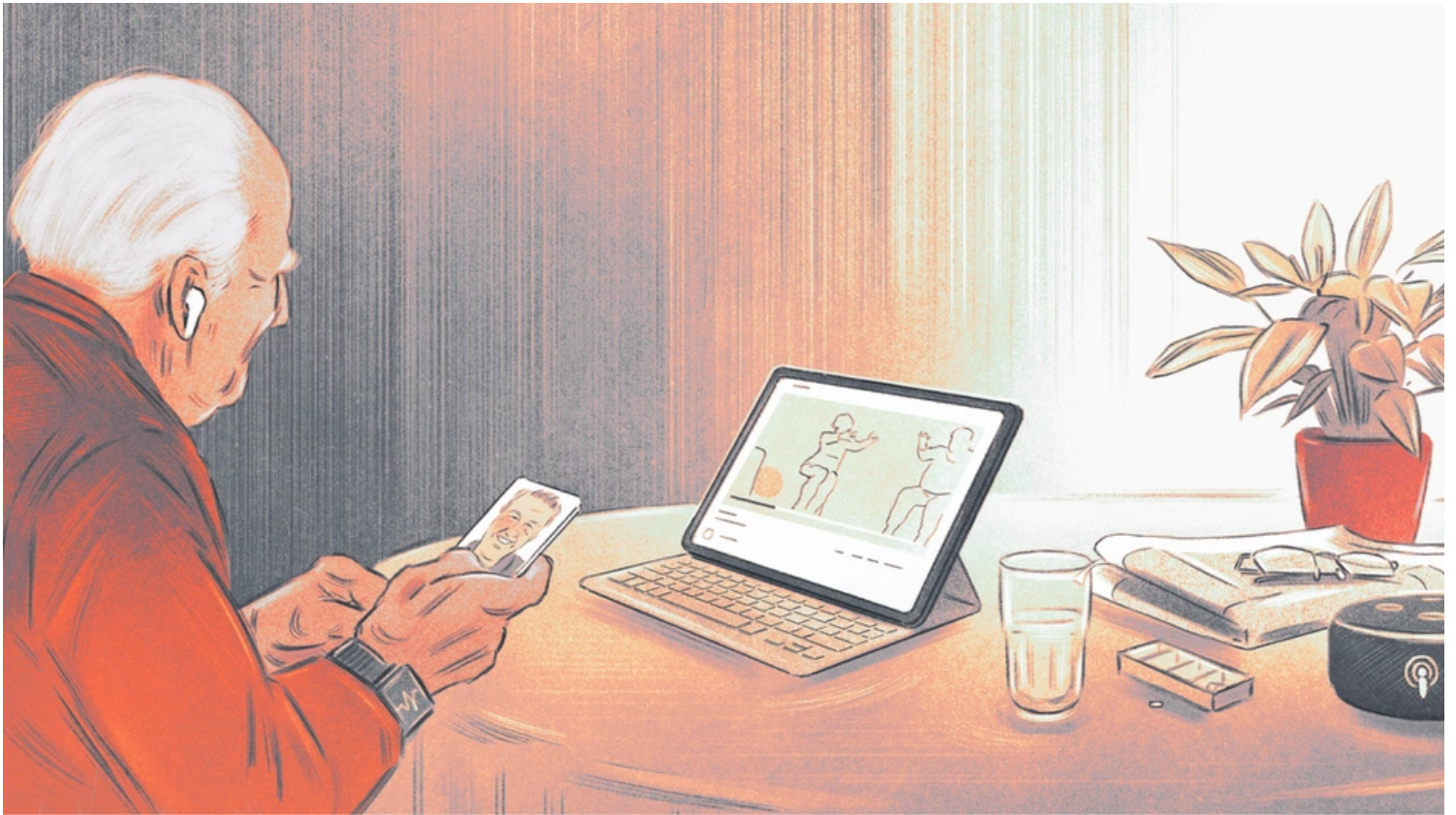


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ON THE INTERNET

LINDA POON / SARAH HOLDER MAY 6, 2020

**For some people over 65 facing loneliness and prolonged isolation, expanded tech literacy is a new skill that may stay with them long after lockdowns lift.**

The last real disaster Bonnie Weiss lived through was San Francisco's 1989 earthquake. Even watching a piece of chimney break through her living room window didn't prepare her to live alone during a global pandemic, she says. Weiss is nearing 80 years old, and has no children. Her partner, who's ill and more susceptible to catching coronavirus, lives 30 miles away. She wishes she could hug or cuddle or hold hands with him, or with anyone. But San Francisco just extended its shelter-in-place, so at least until the end of May, that will be impossible.

"We're all going through it together," she said. "That's the only thing that's a little consoling."

As days stretch into weeks, Weiss has been moving parts of her social and work life online, little by little. For years, she's taught college classes and retirement community lectures on musical theater, like "Dazzling Dames of Broadway" and "The Genius of Sondheim." Now, she's taken them to Zoom. "It keeps me busy, keeps me working, keeps me making a living," she said. "But I do it mainly for the joy."

Instead of visits with friends, she looks forward to calls twice a week from the Friendship Line, a 24-hour hotline and check-up service established by San Francisco's Institute on Aging in the 1970s. "It's nice to hear a caring voice who has some concern."

Already, moving lectures and happy hours onto video chat screens has become almost a social distancing cliché. But for millions of older adults, many of whom are particularly susceptible to loneliness, being able to navigate the vast sea of online resources — beyond just Zoom — can be central to their resilience.

For many, the crisis has motivated them to learn and expand their use of these technologies for the first time. And given the uncertainty of when and how the pandemic will end, these skills may be crucial to their process of adjusting to whatever the "new normal" may be — especially if it's one where older people are encouraged to continue some physical distancing for longer than their younger counterparts.

Still, the coronavirus crisis and its ripple effects are borne differently by people of different classes, races, geographies and personalities within generations. Some older adults are afraid they'll live out their final years in fear and with limited mobility; others have embraced their new lifestyle, and gained greater appreciation for the connections that matter.

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**"There are people who had a device but weren't really using it. Those are the people who have big opportunities."**

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Studies show more seniors than ever have adopted smartphones — 42%, according to Pew — and 67% say they have internet access. At the same time, only a quarter of adults over 65 say they feel confident about using electronics to go online.

"There's the people who could always do it; there are the people who could do some, but are getting better with all this practice; and there are people who had a device but weren't really using it," said Louise Aronson, a geriatrician and professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. "Maybe they got it and they thought it was too complicated, or their kids got it for them and they never used it. Those are the people who have big opportunities."

Nearly 13.8 million Americans over the age of 65 — about 28% of that population — live by themselves, according to 2017 estimates from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Surveys from organizations like AARP and Kaiser Family Foundation suggest that anywhere between 33% and 43% of all older adults in the U.S. experience loneliness either sometimes or frequently. The lack of social connection and brain stimulation is associated with higher risks of physical health problems like heart disease, dementia and even premature death, according to a recent report from the National Academy of Sciences.

Shelter-in-place edicts have the potential to exacerbate the loneliness crisis among older adults, who are now unable to see families or attend social gatherings. For those in nursing homes, especially, the isolation is compounded by far higher risk of catching a deadly case of the virus — across the U.S., about one in 10 nursing homes has reported a case, and Kaiser Family Foundation data shows more than 10,000 people in long-term care facilities have died. Strict bans on visitors mean that millions of older people in nursing homes and other retirement communities have been unable to see their adult children or grandchildren in person.

“It’s a tremendous stress on the mental health of seniors,” said Edward Schneider, a professor of gerontology at the University of Southern California. But for him, the options feel tremendous, too. “My day starts at 5:30 in the morning and ends at 8:30 or 9 at night, and I’m busy the entire time,” he said. “I don’t feel terribly isolated — although I am isolated, because I’m 80 years old — but I’m interacting with people all the time.”

## Turning to tech

When states began announcing their isolation orders, organizers behind the digital platform Senior Planet started making calls to more than 2,000 seniors in the six cities where they operate, asking them what they needed during the social isolation period. The responses ran the gamut: They wanted tutorials on Zoom, sure, but also on everything else from gaming programs to telemedicine to ride-sharing apps. They wanted to stay engaged with the outside world, too, through virtual social clubs and fitness classes, even online dating.

“Having something to learn about is a good way to meet new people that’s not based on the purpose of meeting new people but on having similar interest in topics,” says Melissa Sakow, the director of communications for Older Adults Technology Services, which runs Senior Planet.

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**“These are communities of older adults who are taking charge of the impact of physical distancing. And that is such a different narrative than the narrative around ‘victims of Covid dying.’”**

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It helps to have an already-established community, because it can act as social support as well as tech support. Weiss, for example, is part of the 375-member San Francisco Village, one of 300 local chapters in the national “village movement” of aging-in-place organizations. These villages offer a twist on retirement communities: Instead of living together, seniors remain in their homes and neighborhoods, tapping local volunteers for errands and doctors’ trips, and convening socially for book clubs or memoir groups or film screenings. Before the pandemic, this built-in network helped Weiss and others connect in person. Now, they’re pushing each other to find social ties online.

In one of these villages in San Francisco, Kate Hoepke, 65, onboarded more than 120 new volunteers during the first month of shelter in place, most of them Millennials, who help with technology training. In another village in Pasadena, Belinda Vidaurri has been patiently walking people through how to use Zoom over the phone with the help of volunteer graduate students. A buddy system, which never really caught on pre-Covid, has organically emerged among the Villagers; members call their friends and share call-in numbers for online sessions they might like.

“These are communities of older adults who are taking charge of the impact of physical distancing — educating themselves and transforming and reinventing themselves to be able to meet the moment,” said Charlotte Dickson, the executive director of Village Movement California, an umbrella organization of villages in the state. “And that is such a different narrative than the narrative around ‘victims of Covid dying.’”

As a result of this online pivot, the villages have been able to reach more people who wouldn’t otherwise show up to physical meetings, even before the lockdowns started. San Francisco’s meditation group once had 12 to 15 in-person attendees each week; now that it’s moved online, 25 people sign on. Zoom Tai Chi is popular, as is improv class; the chapter’s LGBTQ circle has doubled in size.



San Francisco Village members participate in an improv class one Thursday evening. (Courtesy of Kate Hoepke, executive director, San Francisco Village)

The advantages extend beyond socializing. At Senior Planet, tech trainings have been among its most popular virtual offerings: everything from shopping on Amazon and making person-to-person mobile payments to accessing podcasts.

Since mastering Zoom, 68-year-old Pat Jasso in San Antonio, Texas, has diligently been learning how to apply for SNAP benefits online and use telemedicine portals — not for herself, but so that she can teach others. Jasso leads a few of the tech tutorials on Senior Planet, including one on Google Classrooms that she says is useful for adults who end up having to take care of grandchildren. “We call it ‘Grandparents, Grandkids to Google,’” she says. “I do a Zoom to help grandparents [monitor] how the kids are doing, or what they’re doing.”

Jasso has applied some of this new knowledge to her own life. She says she never would have tried telehealth if not for the pandemic. Now that she isn’t able to readily see her doctor, she finally made an account. It wasn’t as complicated as she thought, and she likes that she can see her lab results right on the portal — and she plans to keep using it.

## **The digital divide as social divide**



One recipe for beating social isolation in old age is having an internet connection, a device, and a patient teacher. Pew surveys suggest, though, that while older Americans have become more digitally connected over the years — some through community access or on their phones — the digital revolution still leaves about half of seniors without broadband access at home. Adoption is especially limited among those who are older, and those who earn less income. That means for some, the larger challenge isn't learning a new app; it's having the tools to do it in the first place.

Some cities are trying to fill the gap. With a \$5 million investment from T-Mobile, New York City has started handing out computer tablets, along with a year's worth of free mobile internet service, to public housing residents age 62 and older — part of Mayor Bill de Blasio's ongoing "Internet Master Plan" to close the city's digital divide. "COVID-19 has made clear to all that broadband is a public health necessity too," John Paul Farmer, chief technology officer of New York City, said in an email to CityLab. "For people to access essential services online, they first have to be online. It's just that simple." The city has also teamed up with the group Older Adults Technology Services to offer device set-up and tech assistance to recipients.

The initiative is a good start, says Allison Nickerson at the nonprofit LiveOn NY, which promotes better age-in-place policies in the city. But there are nearly 500,000 older residents without broadband access in New York City, according to [official data](#), and those who don't live in public housing may need assistance too. Nickerson adds that many live in poverty and face other issues that the lack of connection to services exacerbates, including food insecurity and barriers to health resources. Her organization's own data suggests that some 320,000 seniors not living in nursing homes fall into that category.

California is [partnering with Google](#) to give out 10,000 hotspots to people in need — not just seniors but also families with kids. In other states, cities have set up Wi-Fi hotspots in the parking lots of schools and public libraries, where seniors have [previously turned](#) for tech assistance. In fact, as libraries closed their doors last month, the American Library Association [recommended](#) that they leave their Wi-Fi on for residents to access from outside the buildings. The private sector, too, has launched some new initiatives, like in Washington, where Comcast is opening up 65,000 [public hotspots](#).

## Recommended

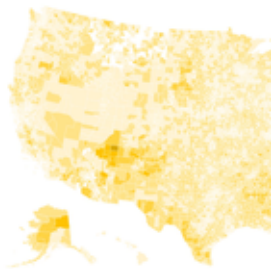
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It's not always resources that are the problem: It can be hard for seniors to adopt new technology that wasn't designed for them. "We blame people for not knowing how to use technology, but we know that if somebody learns to drive when they're not a teenager, they don't have the same instincts," said Aronson. Tech companies would do well to invent devices with bigger, clearer icons, colors, and shapes — built for those with arthritis or bad eyesight — "instead of saying there's something wrong with you because you can't use this technology," she said.

Juniper Communities, which runs senior living communities in New Jersey, Colorado and Pennsylvania, launched a centralized website for seniors in any living situation to find digital resources curated from across the internet after group activities in their facilities were canceled. The interface itself is senior-friendly. "The font is pretty large — much larger than a traditional website," said Sara Mitchell, the director of communications and client relations at Solinity, which helped build the Virtual Connections platform. "That's on purpose." In the first month it went live, 5,000 people had used the site.

## **Tech can't replace touch**

For many older people, some degree of isolation was already a part of life before coronavirus. But that doesn't make their human desire for touch and in-person interaction any less acute.

Weiss is getting the hang of online teaching, and would be happy to continue with occasional Zoom lectures if it meant she could cut down on commuting days. But she doesn't envision a new chapter of social life mediated by screens; even now, she prefers the phone to video calls with friends. "The experience of just being with a person in reality, it takes on a different dimension," she said. "We'll be much more aware of how different that is and how important it is."

But aging experts fear that seniors will be the last to return to the semblance of "normal" life that includes frequent in-person contact. In Europe, some political leaders have suggested that the elderly should continue distancing for the rest of the year; California Governor Gavin Newsom has said as much, too. In nursing homes across the country, rules banning or limiting visitors may not loosen for some time, Mitchell says. And even people living alone may be reticent to return to groups they once enjoyed. That means short-term resilience measures may soon become the status quo, a realization that could be toughest for the country's oldest.

"There are many ways for Covid to kill you," says Aronson. "It can kill you directly, but if you spend the last year or last quarter or third of your life locked in a single room or home never seeing or touching ... Already, here's a group that doesn't get enough of that."

If seniors are being asked to continue physical distancing for the better part of the next year or two, divisions between generations may calcify. "You're basically disappearing almost 30% of the state of California, and ageism is all about disappearing people ... once you retire, you're done," said Dickson. "The whole field [of aging] is going to have to be really intentional and vigilant."

Nickerson at the group LiveOn NY adds that it's easy to forget that older adults are resilient, and can offer guidance to the younger members of their communities. "A lot of older people spend significant time giving back to community, and it's very hard when you lose that role," she said. "They want to get back and be part of the conversations with their community members, so providing and facilitating their ability to do that is critical." Some of the social infrastructure that's emerging during the pandemic — like memoir-writing clubs that connect senior storytellers with Millennials willing to record them, and groups that specifically link the young and old for digital check-ins — could create lasting ties.

Local legislators must also balance the need to protect vulnerable communities' health with treating them with the same respect they do other groups, says Aronson. That means policies that aren't based on assumptions that "young people are able to make decisions and go out with protection, and older people aren't" — ones that respect both their very real risks, and their capabilities.



At 100 years old, Angela Little is a self-proclaimed “social creature.” She’s more tech-savvy than most people her age: A former U.C. Berkeley professor in the department of nutritional science, she remembers using some of the first big IBM computers. But she’s not as interested in learning how to use more modern video-conferencing platforms like Zoom.

“I am at the end of my life,” she said. “I am not looking forward to developing into something else.” She does like FaceTiming, texts her daughter and grandchildren constantly throughout the day and streams contemporary dramas on Netflix. What she wants more than anything, though, is a visit from her family. “If they could come by, that would make me feel a lot better,” she said. “But they’re sequestered, too.”

If the lockdown weren’t in place, Little knows exactly how she’d want to spend her days. “I would tell my friend in Berkeley to get on BART, and say, ‘Let’s go and have sushi and have our long conversations.’ I would go and take a walk with somebody, I would go to the park, I would go look at my ocean — all these things that I cannot do now,” she said. “I’m not complex at this moment. I don’t live a complicated life. But I want to hug my friends, and my granddaughters — I want that intimacy.”

*CORRECTION: This story has been amended to clarify that Juniper runs senior living communities.*

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