The coronavirus pandemic may be officially over, but loneliness is still devastating New Yorkers

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Gloria Besser has been on her own since COVID took her husband early in the pandemic.

Mike died in a nursing home in April 2020 and since he's been gone, there really isn't anyone else she can talk to about her problems or frustrations. She misses chatting about the good times, too. She feels she can't talk to her two children or friends in the same way.

Sometimes, with no where else to turn, she grabs a coffee mug that has Mike's picture on it and has a conversation with him, in spirit at least.

"It's not like it was before," Besser said. "I tell myself, 'It is what it is.' And I talk to the mug with his picture on it a lot."

The worst of the COVID pandemic may be over, according to the federal government and the World Health Organization—but it has left deep scars.

The pandemic kept older adults at home, eroded their support systems, killed their friends and distanced them from loved ones. And now, after three precious years have passed, many are struggling to get back to their pre-pandemic lives and to cope with the loneliness that has endured.

New Yorkers, especially the elderly, are more lonely and socially disconnected than ever.

New York City was COVID's epicenter. Older adults were among the hardest-hit populations, dying at higher rates than any other age group. Nearly two million city dwellers lost at least one person close to them to COVID in the first 18 months of the pandemic, according to city data.

"Loneliness is not just an unfortunate side effect of the human condition," said Diane Meier, a professor of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine at Mount Sinai. "It is directly linked to the development of depression, functional impairment, meaning not being able to take care of yourself, and cognitive impairment.

"And because it's linked to those conditions, it is also linked to mortality."

Jack Godby lives alone in a Lower East Side apartment lined with his ceramics collection, houseplants and old photos.

"I don't really have a life," Godby, 80, said. "I don't get out to social activities. I'm basically in my apartment. And it's kind of hard to be social when you're in your apartment."

"Most of my friends have either died or moved out of the city," he added.

Godby's health problems make getting out difficult: He has limited mobility and uses a walker, and also suffered a series of strokes about 20 years ago and has long been HIV positive. He caught COVID early on during the pandemic, and he's being careful not to get it again.

Godby frequents a few stores on his block and has a little community through his favorite checkout person at Whole Foods, a friend who walks with him once a week, his neighbors and others who occasionally drop in on him. He doesn't really like Zoom meetings, because his computer doesn't have a camera. But it's difficult to leave his apartment often, and that's restricting.

"I really don't want a sob story about my life. I'm not sad, and I'm a little lonely because I can't get around much," he said.

Broken bonds

COVID has carved many paths to loneliness.

Even though the lockdowns and restrictions have ended, many older

adults remain isolated or lonely because of the death of friends and spouses, fractured relationships, fear of catching the virus or because they are suffering from long COVID or other high-risk health conditions.

"Going back to baseline from three years ago is not as easy, because people's health has declined during that time," Meier, from Mount Sinai, said.

Carole Vahey used to go to her senior center at least three days a week, led jewelry-making classes and fundraisers, took herself shopping and enjoyed social clubs. But then the pandemic hit.

"[COVID] has put an anchor on my backside," Vahey, 85, said.

Vahey has "no desire" to go back to the senior center for fear of catching the virus and anxiety about being in a big crowd.

Now, she describes her life as a series of doctor's appointments for various illnesses, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, which she developed during the pandemic. It makes breathing difficult and a case of COVID is potentially deadly for her.

Vahey, a former nurse and medical receptionist, said she still fills her time with many of the same activities, but they look a bit different. Friends visit her every week or so, and she can still do many of her hobbies.

"I still do things. I can knit at home if I want, I can still make jewelry if I want," Vahey, who lives in eastern Queens, said. "And I have those things in my home, so I can do what I have to do."

Others, still carrying scars from years of isolation, have tried to reclaim

some of what they've lost by rebuilding social circles or spending times at senior centers.

Roberta Curley, 68, lives alone in the West Village. COVID was "pretty horrific," she said. A self-described germaphobe, COVID made her extremely anxious, and she didn't see anyone, including her boyfriend who lives nearby, for weeks on end.

"That feeling of isolation when you're in your apartment, and you live alone is just very painful," Curley said.

"It's not gone, and it probably will never be the same and no one is gonna be the same," she said of that feeling. "... I think that it has not completely gone away."

Curley said that joining a senior center has enriched her life and given her hope for the future. She doesn't know where she'd be without it.

Sofiya Sorkin, 75, lives in Coney Island but is originally from Belarus. Sorkin, who used to be a public school teacher, started attending her local senior center about a year ago, when the death of her husband in November 2021 to cancer left her depressed. Around the same time, her son fled NYC due to COVID.

"My son moved to Florida. My daughter lived in New Jersey. I became very lonely," Sorkin said. "I didn't work anymore, because I was retired. I didn't want to go back to school [to teach]. …I was very stressed."

The center is now Sorkin's community. Friends and staff members at the center ask how she's doing and remember details about her life. She feels cared for.

"I feel good, feel better, not to cry all the time, because I felt so terrible,

physically, emotionally, psychologically. They really help," she said.

Still at risk

While loneliness can be emotionally devastating, there are also physical health risks that can profoundly impact older adults. Isolation can lead to higher chances of dementia, heart disease, anxiety, depression and stroke.

"Isolation is the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day," said Beth Finkel, the New York state director of the AARP.

In the three years since COVID first hit New York, many have developed other health conditions that have made a return to pre-pandemic life impossible. Surgeries were delayed and doctors visits postponed. Some contracted long COVID.

"Many people ended up with other illnesses or chronic problems that might have been caught earlier. And then that feeds into feeling more isolated because then you can't get out," Finkel said.

Debbie Socolar, 69, lives a more isolated life for health reasons. Socolar, who lives in Morningside Heights, caught COVID from her dying 104-year-old mother. It was an extremely mild case, but it caused a case of long COVID. Socolar now has extreme fatigue and has trouble walking more than a block.

"When I first went out for a walk two weeks or so later, I could barely walk two blocks without needing to stop and rest," Socolar said. "A month earlier, I had walked a mile carrying a heavy bag of stuff from a farmers market and it was not an ordeal. And it persists to this day."

Before COVID, she liked to go to the movies or out to dinner with

friends. Now, she stays home, rarely leaving the neighborhood except to go to doctor's appointments. She's had to rethink aspects of her life she wouldn't have thought of before, like taking taxis over Ubers, since they're more likely to have a plastic divider.

"I feel lucky to live in a neighborhood where there are for example, benches along Riverside Drive and ... on the traffic islands along Broadway. For older adults, and certainly for somebody with long COVID like me or other people with disabilities, it really is a valuable community asset to be able to go out and sit on benches," she said.

"I really, really don't want to risk getting COVID again," Socolar said. "That means that I feel pretty limited in what are safe environments."

Seeking repair

Experts hope that some of the community bonds broken before and during the pandemic can be repaired.

Doctors and experts, including the U.S. Surgeon General, who recently announced an "Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," are pushing for action to help ease the pain many across the nation are feeling now.

"[We are] belatedly recognizing as a society that everybody being alone in their own homes is not such a great thing… We've been paying a pretty steep price for giving up that commitment to social connection and human connection," Meier said.

Helen Yalof, 88, said her problem hasn't been so much about finding friends as keeping them, because they often pass away. During the pandemic, friends were dying around her, some to COVID. Some fled the city for Florida. It left her feeling alone.

"They didn't promise me a rose garden but well, I just did not want to think of what it would be like to be older when I was younger," she said. "I just did not want to take it in. And now all of a sudden, having to take it in was an explosion."

She lives in the Greenwich Village and attends Westbeth Senior Center, where she enjoys writing classes.

"If I can meet good friends— and let's hope they live long enough to stay around—that would be wonderful," Yalof said.

"I eat a lot, sleep a lot and sometimes I talk to friends, new friends that I have gotten," she said. My old friends are practically gone. They're all gone in some way or the other."