

Older Men's Connections Often Wither When They're on Their Own

Older men tend to have fewer friends than women and be less inclined to make new friends. Often, they're reluctant to ask for help.

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At age 66, South Carolina physician Paul Rousseau decided to retire after tending for decades to the suffering of people who were seriously ill or dying. It was a difficult and emotionally fraught transition.

"I didn't know what I was going to do, where I was going to go," he told me, describing a period of crisis that began in 2017.

Seeking a change of venue, Rousseau moved to the mountains of North Carolina, the start of an extended period of wandering. Soon, a sense of emptiness enveloped him. He had no friends or hobbies — his work as a doctor had been all-consuming. Former colleagues didn't get in touch, nor did he reach out.

His wife had passed away after a painful illness a decade earlier. Rousseau was estranged from one adult daughter and in only occasional contact with another. His isolation mounted as his three dogs, his most reliable companions, died.

Rousseau was completely alone — without friends, family, or a professional identity — and overcome by a sense of loss.

"I was a somewhat distinguished physician with a 60-page resume," Rousseau, now 73, wrote in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* in May. "Now, I'm 'no one,' a retired, forgotten old man who dithers away the days."

In some ways, older men living alone are disadvantaged compared with older women in similar circumstances. Research shows that men tend to have fewer friends than women and be less inclined to make new friends. Often, they're reluctant to ask for help.

"Men have a harder time being connected and reaching out," said [Robert Waldinger](#), a psychiatrist who directs the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has traced the arc of hundreds of men's lives over a span of more than eight decades. The men in the study who fared the worst, Waldinger said, "didn't have friendships and things they were interested in — and couldn't find

them.” He recommends that men invest in their “social fitness” in addition to their physical fitness to ensure they have satisfying social interactions.

Slightly more than 1 in every 5 men ages 65 to 74 live alone, according to [2022 Census Bureau data](#). That rises to nearly 1 in 4 for those 75 or older. Nearly 40% of these men are divorced, 31% are widowed, and 21% never married.

That’s a significant change from 2000, when only 1 in 6 older men lived by themselves. Longer life spans for men and rising [divorce](#) rates are contributing to the trend. It’s difficult to find information about this group — which is dwarfed by the number of women who live alone — because it hasn’t been studied in depth. But psychologists and psychiatrists say these older men can be quite vulnerable.

When men are widowed, their health and well-being tend to decline more than women’s.

“Older men have a tendency to ruminate, to get into our heads with worries and fears and to feel more lonely and isolated,” said Jed Diamond, 80, a therapist and the author of “[Surviving Male Menopause](#)” and “[The Irritable Male Syndrome](#).”

Add in the decline of civic institutions where men used to congregate — think of the Elks or the Shriners — and older men’s reduced ability to participate in athletic activities, and the result is a lack of stimulation and the loss of a sense of belonging.

Depression can ensue, fueling excessive alcohol use, accidents, or, in the most extreme cases, suicide. Of all age groups in the United States, men over age 75 have the [highest suicide rate](#), by far.

For this column, I spoke at length to several older men who live alone. All but two (who’d been divorced) were widowed. Their experiences don’t represent all men who live alone. But still, they’re revealing.

The first person I called was Art Koff, 88, of Chicago, a longtime marketing executive I’d known for several years. When I reached out in January, I learned that Koff’s wife, Norma, had died the year before, leaving him hobbled by grief. Uninterested in eating and beset by unremitting loneliness, Koff lost 45 pounds.

“I’ve had a long and wonderful life, and I have lots of family and lots of friends who are terrific,” Koff told me. But now, he said, “nothing is of interest to me any longer.”

“I’m not happy living this life,” he said.

Nine days later, I learned that Koff had died. His nephew, Alexander Koff, said he had passed out and was gone within a day. The death certificate cited “end stage protein calorie malnutrition” as the cause.

The transition from being coupled to being single can be profoundly disorienting for older men.

Lodovico Balducci, 80, was married to his wife, Claudia, for 52 years before she died in October 2023. Balducci, a renowned physician known as the “patriarch of geriatric oncology,” [wrote about his emotional reaction](#) in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, likening Claudia’s death to an “amputation.”

“I find myself talking to her all the time, most of the time in my head,” Balducci told me in a phone conversation. When I asked him whom he confides in, he admitted, “Maybe I don’t have any close friends.”

Disoriented and disorganized since Claudia died, he said his “anxiety has exploded.”

We spoke in late February. Two weeks later, Balducci moved from Tampa to New Orleans, to be near his son and daughter-in-law and their two teenagers.

“I am planning to help as much as possible with my grandchildren,” he said. “Life has to go on.”

Verne Ostrander, a carpenter in the small town of Willits, California, about 140 miles north of San Francisco, was reflective when I spoke with him, also in late February. His second wife, Cindy Morninglight, died four years ago after a long battle with cancer.

“Here I am, almost 80 years old — alone,” Ostrander said. “Who would have guessed?”

When Ostrander isn’t painting watercolors, composing music, or playing guitar, “I fall into this lonely state, and I cry quite a bit,” he told me. “I don’t ignore those feelings. I let myself feel them. It’s like therapy.”

Ostrander has lived in Willits for nearly 50 years and belongs to a men’s group and a couples’ group that’s been meeting for 20 years. He’s in remarkably good health and in close touch with his three adult children, who live within easy driving distance.

“The hard part of living alone is missing Cindy,” he told me. “The good part is the freedom to do whatever I want. My goal is to live another 20 to 30 years and become a better artist and get to know my kids when they get older.”

The Rev. Johnny Walker, 76, lives in a low-income apartment building in a financially challenged neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. Twice divorced, he’s been on his own for five years. He, too, has close family connections. At least one of his several children and grandchildren checks in on him every day.

Walker says he had a life-changing religious conversion in 1993. Since then, he has depended on his faith and his church for a sense of meaning and community.

“It’s not hard being alone,” Walker said when I asked whether he was lonely. “I accept Christ in my life, and he said that he would never leave us or forsake us. When I wake up in the morning, that’s a new blessing. I just thank God that he has brought me this far.”

Waldinger recommended that men “make an effort every day to be in touch with people. Find what you love — golf, gardening, birdwatching, pickleball, working on a political campaign — and pursue it,” he said. “Put yourself in a situation where you’re going to see the same people over and over again. Because that’s the most natural way conversations get struck up and friendships start to develop.”

Rousseau, the retired South Carolina doctor, said he doesn’t think about the future much. After feeling lost for several years, he moved across the country to Jackson, Wyoming, in the summer of 2023. He embraced solitude, choosing a remarkably isolated spot to live — a 150-square-foot cabin with no running water and no bathroom, surrounded by 25,000 undeveloped acres of public and privately owned land.

“Yes, I’m still lonely, but the nature and the beauty here totally changed me and focused me on what’s really important,” he told me, describing a feeling of redemption in his solitude.

Rousseau realizes that the death of his parents and a very close friend in his childhood left him with a sense of loss that he kept at bay for most of his life. Now, he said, rather than denying his vulnerability, he’s trying to live with it. “There’s only so long you can put off dealing with all the things you’re trying to escape from.”

It’s not the life he envisioned, but it’s one that fits him, Rousseau said. He stays busy with volunteer activities — cleaning tanks and running tours at Jackson’s fish hatchery, serving as a part-time park ranger, and maintaining trails in nearby national forests. Those activities put him in touch with other people, mostly strangers, only intermittently.

What will happen to him when this way of living is no longer possible?

“I wish I had an answer, but I don’t,” Rousseau said. “I don’t see my daughters taking care of me. As far as someone else, I don’t think there’s anyone else who’s going to help me.”

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