

The Power of Connection

Photography by **TESS MAYER**

Remaining socially engaged is one of the keys to a healthy and fulfilling retirement—even in the face of an isolating pandemic.

WHEN LYNDA KENNEY RETIRED from infrastructure finance in 2016, her friends encouraged her to attend a dance class for older adults, which she admittedly thought would be “hokey.”

Today Kenney is a weekly fixture at her neighborhood class in downtown Manhattan, organized by Dances for a Variable Population, and describes the experience in very different terms: *fabulous* and *heart-opening*.

“You really form a bond with your fellow dancers,” she says. “And I’ve made very good friends there. The community is not just the people who dance—it’s our teachers as well. We really all love each other a lot.”

For retirees such as Kenney, the seemingly simple act of connecting with others through social groups, common hobbies, and mutual passions can make a large and positive difference in the quality of their lives after full-time work—providing a renewed sense of purpose and a range of health and wellness benefits.

“As people get ready for retirement, it’s important that they have a solid financial plan in place,” says Sandra Timmermann, a gerontologist who consults with Equitable on retirement and aging. “Once they address their finances, they should start developing their own social engagement plan, thinking through how they want to spend their time and what will give them a sense of purpose once they retire. Staying active and engaged in meaningful activities is a key to aging well.”

And aging well is more important than ever. Since 1900, life expectancy has increased for Americans by 29 years, which means some adults spend more time retired than they did working. Studies show that robust social engagement is associated with retirees living better and longer—and group exercise classes, like the program Kenney attended, can be particularly powerful. Research has found that they reduce health care costs, decrease the risk of hospitalization and depression, ease feelings of loneliness, and increase life satisfaction and the ability of older people to perform daily living activities.

But social connection of any kind can be beneficial. According to Timmermann, being engaged in life is what counts. The important thing for retirees is to find communities in which they feel a sense of belonging and a joint purpose.

Want to make a difference? Volunteer with a literacy organization. Ready to start your own business? Connect with a mentor or a local entrepreneur association. Love nature and the outdoors? Join a running, walking, rock-climbing, or bird-watching group. Enjoy acting? Get involved with senior theater.

Do you miss being a cheerleader, or have you always wanted to wave a pair of pom-poms? There’s an Arizona-based cheer squad for women ages 55 and older that has you covered.

“In society, we tend to stereotype older people and look at them in a different way, like, *Oh, those seniors! They just want to sit around and play bingo!*” says Timmermann. “But that isn’t true anymore. Times have changed.”



Above, a Dances for a Variable Population class takes place in downtown Manhattan in early March. In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, the nonprofit switched to remote classes, seen on the right, later that month.

WHEN KENNEY FIRST RETIRED she was excited to have extra time on her hands. She planned to make more art, get some much-needed sleep, and improve her health. However, she didn’t fully grasp what she was leaving behind.

“While I had longtime friends outside of work, I had spent five days a week with a work community that was no longer there,” she says. “Now missing was the working together, social interaction, and my long lunchtime walks into Central Park. With little routine, I had a hard time concentrating and staying on task.”

Kenney’s experience isn’t unique. One of the biggest challenges retirees can face is the loss of office friendships and camaraderie. One survey of nearly 1,500 retirees found that the number of those who count former coworkers as friends dropped from 61 percent to 41 percent over the first 10 years of retirement—and that the emotional closeness of those relationships declines over time.

“Once people leave the workplace, they lose the structure, the mental challenge, and social connections with co-workers that a job provides,” says Timmermann. “That can lead to social isolation, which is a serious problem for those who are older.”

According to a National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report published in February, nearly one quarter of Americans aged 65 and older are socially isolated, while 43 percent of adults aged 60 or older report feeling lonely. Both isolation and feelings of loneliness can be detrimental to one’s health and sense of emotional well-being.

For retirees in particular, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating those risks. Because older adults are more vulnerable to the coronavirus, many have adopted a cautious approach to social engagement—postponing travel, canceling engagements with friends and family, missing part-time and volunteer work, staying home from churches and gyms, and otherwise rearranging their daily lives.

Even as state and local governments begin to lift social-distancing and stay-at-home orders, care and caution likely will define the new normal.

“With the pandemic, we are now in a situation where older people are even more isolated and not able to get out and participate the way they used to,” says Timmermann. “The loneliness factor is potentially being multiplied.” who are older—and it’s now made worse by the coronavirus pandemic.”



Dances for a Variable Population’s students attend classes from home, staying connected and continuing their creative pursuits. In times of significant change, activity groups like these take on even greater meaning for participants.

WHILE ADJUSTING TO THE NEW NORMAL WILL BE CHALLENGING, retirees don’t have to go it alone. When New York City largely shut down in March to stem the spread of COVID-19, Dances for a Variable Population began sharing short exercise videos to encourage students to keep moving and stay connected.

Those videos were followed by a rapidly growing schedule of phone and online video courses. Regulars such as Kenney tuned in, and so did a number of new participants, including students’ friends and family who live outside of New York City.

“Loneliness was an epidemic before this happened, and it’s been interesting to see how we’re handling that,” says Magda Kaczmarek, a dance teacher and the organization’s operations manager. “I think moving forward, this platform might be very well adapted to those older adults who are most isolated, whether because they’re homebound or they’re in a really remote community. This is a potential resource.”

Local activity groups across the country, such as a senior theater company in California that teaches performing arts classes, are taking a similar approach to Dances for a Variable Population; by going virtual, they’re providing isolated older adults the opportunity to connect with others from the safety of their homes.

“There are so many opportunities online to connect to other people and do the things you love to do,” says Timmermann. “You can listen to concerts, play bridge, and even have virtual happy hours with friends—and they are easily accessible, even for those with little experience with technology.”

“For the most part, this generation of retirees wants to remain active and engaged. While we are living in a challenging time during the pandemic, older adults are resourceful and still can find ways to pursue the things they always wanted to do but never had the time.”

This sentiment is echoed by Naomi Goldberg Haas, the founder and artistic director of Dances for a Variable Population. She emphasizes “how important it is to move from wherever you are in life” and notes that activity classes, like those offered by her organization, have more than social and physical benefits. They also open up opportunities to explore one’s inherent creativity and discover new passions.

That’s certainly true for Kenney. Her weekly dance classes have provided more than just new friends; they’ve eased her transition into a fulfilling retirement by providing a new sense of purpose—and expanded her understanding what being a retiree can look like. “I’m more accepting of being an elder and recognize that you can still move in creative ways, not just doing an exercise class or something,” says Kenney. “It made me recognize my bias and dissolve it.” By seeking out new communities and social connections of their own, other retirees can find the same. “If Dances for a Variable Population had entered my life either while [I was retiring] or at work, dance would already have been embedded into my routine,” she says. “[And that would have made] for a smoother transition into my new life.” ●



Lynda Kenney, right, and a fellow student at a Dances for a Variable Population class in March. The organization continues to adapt and fill a crucial role for its growing community of remote students until in-person classes can resume.