Resources Are Expanding for Older Adults on Their Own

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Jeff Kromrey, 69, will sit down with his daughter the next time she visits and show her how to access his online accounts if he has an unexpected health crisis.

Gayle Williams-Brett, 69, plans to tackle a project she's been putting off for months: organizing all her financial information.

Michael Davis, 71, is going to draft a living will and ask a close friend to be his health care surrogate and executor of his estate.

These seniors have been inspired to take these and other actions by an innovative course for such "solo agers": Aging Alone Together, offered by Dorot, a social services agency in New York City.

Most of them live alone, without a spouse, a partner, or adult children to help them manage as they grow older.

Until a few years ago, few resources were available for this growing slice of the older population.

Now, there are several Facebook groups for solo agers, as well as in-person groups springing up around the country, conferences and webinars, a national clearinghouse of resources, and an expanding array of books on the topic.

All address these seniors' need to connect with other people, prevent isolation, and prepare for a future when they might become less robust, encounter more health issues, and need more assistance.

"Older adults who cannot rely on family members need to be very intentional about creating support systems and putting other plans in place," said Ailene Gerhardt, a patient advocate in Boston who created the Navigating Solo Network three years ago.

In a survey published last year, AARP — which broadens the definition of older Americans to people 50 and older — examined those who live alone and don't have living children. Ten percent of those 50 or older meet this definition, AARP estimates. An additional 11% have at least one

living child but are estranged from them. And 13% have children who they believe can't or won't help them manage their finances and health care.

Preparing in isolation for the future can be daunting. "If solo agers don't feel they have people to talk to as they craft their aging plan, they often will skip the whole process," said Gerhardt, who endorses a group planning model for these seniors.

That's the format Dorot has adopted for Aging Alone Together, which is available nationally online free of charge and in person in New York City. More than 1,000 people have participated in the program since it launched in 2021. Dorot is working with partners around the country to expand its reach.

The program consists of six 90-minute, interactive weekly sessions that focus on these seniors' key concerns: building communities of support, figuring out where to live, completing advance care directives such as living wills, and getting financial and legal affairs in order.

One goal is to help participants identify their priorities and overcome the fear and hesitation that so many older adults feel when peering into their uncertain futures, said Claire Nisen, a Dorot staffer who runs the program. Another is to offer practical tools, advice, and resources that can spur people to action.

Yet another is to foster a sense of community that promotes a "can do" attitude. As Nisen said repeatedly when I took the course in September and October, "Solo aging doesn't mean aging alone."

That message resonated deeply with Williams-Brett, who lives with her severely disabled mother, 97, in a two-story brownstone in Brooklyn. Williams-Brett, who is divorced and never had children, expects to be on her own as she grows older. Her mother had a devastating stroke three years ago, and since then Williams-Brett has been her full-time caregiver.

Overwhelmed by everything on her to-do list — declutter the house, make home repairs, straighten out her finances, safeguard her mother's health — Williams-Brett told me she'd been struggling with shame and fear. "All the time, I feel I'm not doing what I should be well enough," she said.

Hearing other seniors voice similar concerns during Aging Alone Together sessions, Williams-Brett realized she didn't judge them as she was judging herself. "I thought, we all have issues we're dealing with," she said. "You don't have anything to feel ashamed of."

Kromrey, who lives alone in Tampa, Florida, knows he's fortunate to be healthy, financially stable, and very close with his adult daughter, who will be his health care and legal decision-maker should he become incapacitated. Kromrey, widowed nine years ago, also has three sons — two in South Carolina and one in West Palm Beach, Florida.

While participating in Aging Alone Together, Kromrey realized he had assumed he'd never have a

health crisis such as a stroke or heart attack — a common form of denial.

His daughter and her husband planned to travel from North Carolina to join Kromrey over Thanksgiving. During that visit, Kromrey said, he would give her passwords to his computer and online accounts, explain his system for keeping track of bills, and show her where other important files are.

“That way, she’ll just be able to take right over if something unexpected occurs,” he said.

Davis is an artist who never married, doesn’t have siblings and lives alone in Manhattan. In a phone conversation, he said his most pressing concern is “finding something to do that’s worthwhile” now that arthritis has made it difficult for him to paint.

In some ways, Davis is prepared for the future. He has a long-term care insurance policy that will pay for help in the home and a rent-regulated apartment in a building with an elevator. But he recognizes that he’s become too isolated as his artistic activities have waned.

“There are days that go by when I don’t say a word to anyone,” Davis acknowledged. “I have my friends, but they have their own lives, with their children and grandchildren. I’m turning to Dorot for more social contact. And Aging Alone Together has helped me focus on the here and now.”

For more information about Aging Alone Together, email agingalonetogether@dorotusa.org or visit the program’s website.

A national clearinghouse of resources for solo agers and information about solo-ager groups in the United States is available at the Navigating Solo website.

The National Council on Aging has assembled a guide to resources and support for older adults living alone.

Facebook groups for solo agers include Elder Orphans (Aging Alone), Elder Orphans, NYC Solo Agers, and Solo Aging Without Personal Representative. Another online community is the Solo Ager/Aging Together.

Books about planning for solo aging include “Essential Retirement Planning for Solo Agers,” “Solo and Smart,” “Who Will Take Care of Me When I’m Old?” and “The Complete Eldercare Planner.”

Several videos about planning for solo aging can be found on YouTube, including this helpful video from CJE SeniorLife.

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