

Loneliness darkens twilight years

By Mark Johnson of the Journal Sentinel staff

On a warm day in the late summer, 86-year-old Audrey Brennan sat in a wheelchair in her small St. Francis apartment, trying not to think of the pain pill that was wearing off and the throbbing in her cheek that had to be an abscessed tooth and the crushing anxiety of how she would ever get to the dentist. Who would drive her?

She glanced at the clock on the wall, which said 10:30 a.m., though it was the middle of the afternoon. Not that it mattered. Brennan spends most of the day locked in the silence of her thoughts.

"There's an expression, 'my so-called life,'" she said. "That's about the size of it. I sit here all day. I had 26 cousins, but they're all dead now. I'm the only one alive. I had dear friends from grade school. As we got married, we lived close together and, would you believe it, I have one friend with Alzheimer's left. Other than that I'm the only one alive.

"There's no one I can call up and say, 'Do you remember when...?' There's nobody."

Audrey Brennan has a son, but he travels frequently for work. She has a daughter, who lives in Illinois and suffers from health problems that make her visits to Milwaukee difficult and infrequent.

So Brennan lives in an elderly apartment complex called Juniper Court, surrounded by neighbors she barely knows, suffering from a condition reckoned by experts to be almost as harmful to human health as smoking: loneliness.

It is a gnawing, unfulfilled hunger for companionship. And although the particulars of Brennan's story are her own, the general outline is quite common — studies have found the prevalence of loneliness among senior citizens to be about 35% or higher.

Roughly one American in 10 lives alone — a total of 34 million people, according to 2014 census figures. That's an increase of 87% since 1980. It is also a quarter of the households in the country.

That's not to say living alone and being lonely are the same. Many elderly people live alone and still maintain active social lives, playing golf and bridge and going to dinner with friends. But the hold

they keep on this lifestyle is often more tenuous than they know. A fall. The loss of a driver's license. A spouse's long-term illness. Any of these common life events can quickly transform their existence from social to lonely.

And loneliness is a gateway to a host of other health problems. Dozens of medical studies over the last three decades have found that loneliness shortens lives and raises the risk of depression, alcoholism, suicide, Alzheimer's disease, high blood pressure, poor sleep, eating disorders, cognitive deterioration, stress and other chronic conditions.

One recent study of more than 100,000 people, published in the journal [PLoS Medicine](#), found that air pollution increases a person's odds of dying earlier by 5%, obesity by 20% and excessive alcohol use by 30%.

Loneliness exceeds them all, raising the odds of an early death by 45%.

"We think of loneliness as a sad condition. But for social species, being on the social perimeter is not only sad, it is dangerous," University of Chicago loneliness researcher John Cacioppo said in a 2013 TEDx talk in Des Moines.

Humans are not made to be alone. The need for companionship is elemental to our nature — wired into our brains — and its absence, said Cacioppo, "has a lot in common with pain, hunger and thirst."

While health officials have grown accustomed to the challenges posed by pain, hunger and thirst, isolation is different.

"As a physician, I'm really out of my element. There isn't a pill. There isn't an operation for social isolation," said Edmund Duthie, chief of the division of geriatrics at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

With the average life expectancy of Americans now at 78.8 years — almost 10 years longer than it was in 1960 — and baby boomers now entering their senior years, the societal consequences of loneliness loom larger than ever.

"Social isolation is a huge issue," said Art Walaszek, a professor in University of Wisconsin-Madison's department of psychiatry. "The other huge issue is suicide in older adults. After age 65, the suicide rates just skyrocket. They're much higher than for any other demographic group. And one of the top five risk factors for suicide in older adults is social isolation."

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Loneliness sometimes seems like a foreign concept in this age of Facebook, LinkedIn and Skype. On a daily basis, and with minimal effort, we're connected, linked and friended.

Yet many elderly people do not have a computer or Internet access. For the 59% of seniors who do venture online, Facebook and other social media tend to have a rich-get-richer effect, said Chris Segrin, a professor of communication at the University of Arizona. Those with already strong social networks expand them; those without spend hours on Facebook to no avail.

"They are searching," Segrin said. "They're searching for something they cannot find."

There's another problem with the new social networks, said Rose A. Beeson, who has published papers on loneliness and is a visiting assistant professor of nursing at the University of Akron. "With all of that social media, is it really friendship or is it just connections? Can you really rely on them."

In her apartment, Audrey Brennan has given much thought to the nature of friendship. One afternoon, she opened a book written by one of her dearest friends, Jeanette Michalets, and pointed out the inscription:

"To Audrey,

So many thanks for the treasured memories."

"She's one of the few friends I have who's still alive," Brennan said. But Michalets, once a next-door neighbor, lives 45 minutes away in Oconomowoc — which may as well be another country for someone without access to a car.

Another living friend is Norma Donnelly, Brennan's longtime travel buddy. They've been lost together in some of the world's great cities, from Vienna to Seville. Today, Donnelly has glaucoma "and lives way on the other side of town," said Brennan.

In her roster of friends, the dead now far outnumber the living.

There is Eileen, who would get annoyed at something in the paper and call up Brennan so the two of them could yell about it to each other. Dead.

There is Gretchen, who was like a sister to Brennan. Dead.

Finally, there was her friend of 73 years, Theresa, who died in January. "We knew everything there was to know about one another," said Brennan. "How do you replace a friend like that?"

So, she spends most of her time at Juniper Court, a stone's throw from Lake Michigan. The complex has social events, but they're not the kind Brennan enjoys and only make her feel more isolated. She hates bingo; "my social undoing," she calls it.

There are meals in the dining hall and occasional movies. There are people her age.

"You couldn't ask for nicer people," she said.

But there is no Jeannette, no Theresa, no Norma. No one with whom she shares a history.

In the end, there is the apartment that feels as indifferent to her as a hotel room. There is the window she looks out in search of birds. And there is the long wait each day for 6 p.m.

"Jeopardy!"

"I'm always glad when the day is over and I can turn the blasted thing on," she says of the TV. "It's people talking and saying things and you can turn your mind off and forget that you have a dentist's appointment tomorrow. And it is companionship. I hate to say it, but it really and truly is."

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Life wasn't always like this.

Brennan worked as an English teacher and raised two children with her husband, Frank Brennan, a psychiatric social worker. Even after his death 20 years ago, she lived an active, engaged, social life.

Although she missed him, Brennan stayed in their home on Mabbett Ave. She and her friends spent their evenings attending the theater, symphony and ballet. She played bridge on Friday nights. Once a month she went out to lunch with friends. On holidays, she went to the parades.

"Three years ago I was living in my own house, driving my own car, having a very lovely social life," she said, "and in one split second it was all gone."

It happened in the most ordinary way. Early one December morning, she couldn't sleep and shuffled onto the porch of her home to get the newspaper. The paper had landed on the second step. She never saw the patch of ice.

After bending down to retrieve the paper, she rose, turned slightly and slipped. The ball of her left hip crashed against the edge of the step and shattered.

Brennan spent a month in the hospital before returning home. She tried to stay in her house, getting around from room to room with a walker. But the home in Bay View had steps and she could not get up and down them.

Brennan had to sell the place. Worse, she says, she had to sell her beloved Toyota minivan. Her injuries left her unable to drive. For the rest of her life she'd depend on others for a ride just to get toilet paper or milk.

The decision to move was her own and so was the choice of Juniper Court. Years earlier she and a friend had shopped around for retirement homes, taking advantage of the free lunches offered by some.

Still, the first day she can remember feeling lonely was the day she moved into her apartment.

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The person she sees in the mirror now seems alien to her.

"I don't look like myself," Brennan says. "I don't feel like myself."

Loneliness, experts say, runs counter to our nature, even to our self-image. From birth we depend on the friendship and protection of others. Infants, "must instantly engage their parents in protective behavior, and the parents must care enough about these offspring to nurture and protect them," said Cacioppo, the University of Chicago researcher.

"Even once we're grown we're not particularly splendid specimens. Other animals can run faster, see and smell better, and fight more effectively than we can. Our evolutionary advantage is our brain and our ability to communicate, plan, reason and work together. Our survival depends on our collective abilities not on our individual might."

Other threats to survival — hunger, thirst and pain — trigger messages to the brain that something is wrong and steer us toward solutions. [Studies have found that loneliness prompts a similar warning](#), generating higher-than-normal levels of cortisol, a hormone released in response to stress.

Cortisol boosts our fight-or-flight response, increasing blood sugar, helping the body metabolize fats and carbohydrates. The response serves as a temporary measure to get us past an immediate threat. For many, loneliness and its accompanying stresses last only a brief time, perhaps a few days or weeks. People form new friendships, repair old ones and return to a healthier social life.

It is a trauma that passes, similar in some ways to the frantic anxiety over a misplaced set of keys, said Segrin, the University of Arizona researcher. "Most of us get out of that state in five minutes."

The brain of a chronically lonely person, however, does not downshift back to normal, instead maintaining a continuous state of alert: anxious, stressed out, searching for social threats, unable to let down the guard even to sleep properly.

A 2014 paper in [Psychological Bulletin](#) reported that the lonely brain displays higher blood pressure and stress activation and lower control of inflammation, immunity and healthy sleep patterns.

In such a state, loneliness becomes self-reinforcing. The isolated view others not as a solution to the problem of being alone, but as hostile, a threat. As a result their isolation stretches for months and sometimes years.

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The trip to the dentist turned into another reminder of the person Brennan no longer was: the independent woman who drove her own car and never worried about arranging her appointments.

She worried she'd end up reliving recent ordeals. On one occasion, rides to three appointments had cost her almost \$200. Drivers arrived late. Sometimes they forgot to pick her up after an appointment.

The pain in her cheek turned into a frustrating mystery that stretched for weeks. She saw one dentist, then another. Neither found any abscess. Finally, she saw an ear doctor, who diagnosed a salivary gland infection. Antibiotics got rid of the infection.

In general, Brennan's health is quite good. She has managed to avoid many of the conditions linked to loneliness, such as high blood pressure and Alzheimer's disease. Yet even her good health has become a trial to her.

"You know that's almost disappointing because I could live forever like this," she said on a fall afternoon. "I've got beautiful blood pressure. I've got beautiful oxygen, a beautiful heart. I'm so

healthy I should be out enjoying myself."

Sometimes, at night, as she's watching television, she looks down at her damaged legs anchored in the wheelchair and she talks to them: "You poor things," she says. "You used to be so good."

At night, she sleeps poorly, a condition that has been linked to loneliness. She wakes up once an hour, sometimes twice. Although she used to be a late sleeper, these days she begins to wake at 4 in the morning. By 5 she usually gives up trying to get back to sleep.

The newspaper arrives early, and when it doesn't she starts to panic. She knows that filling out the puzzles will take her through to 9 a.m.

"And then I think, 'OK, what do I do now?'" she said.

"Time becomes seamless. The only thing that distinguishes this day from yesterday and from tomorrow is what you eat."

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Much as he loves his mother, Stephen Brennan wishes she would not talk this way.

When she moved to Juniper Court, he hoped she might work in the building's library. He encouraged her to attend social events such as the pizza party held for one of the Packers games.

She did try. She loves to read and joined a book club with about 10 of the residents. But she missed several months due to knee surgery and rehabilitation, and by the time she returned, two of the members had died, "and the book club went kerflooey."

That was close to a year ago.

"I just wish there were some way I could improve her attitude. That's what tears me up," Stephen Brennan said. "You know all of the things she did for you and you want to return them for her."

But the circumstances of his own life have made it difficult to improve hers. In January, he will turn 59. His job, fixing medical devices, requires frequent travel and 50- to 60-hour workweeks. His wife has an incurable illness.

Still, she was the one who came to Audrey Brennan's rescue recently. The reclining chair Brennan sleeps on broke one night as she was adjusting it. When she called the phone number for repairs, she

got a message, saying that the shop wasn't answering calls. If she emailed, the message said, someone would respond — in a couple of days.

Stephen Brennan's wife came to the apartment and figured out the problem — a faulty control. Audrey Brennan was grateful for the help, though the episode made her feel, "like an infant," she said, "like you're clinging to all of these people."

"The glass is half empty and it's broken," Stephen Brennan sighed, describing his mother's mood.

He is determined that in his own old age he will maintain a more positive outlook.

Few studies have examined whether we inherit loneliness through our parents' genes. One, a paper in the [journal Psychological Science](#), attempted to tease out the roles of genes and environment by comparing loneliness in groups of twins and unrelated siblings. Genes, the study found, make a significant contribution, about 50%, though the authors cautioned that their findings needed to be repeated.

Even if we do not share the genes involved in loneliness, many of us share a future that will leave us vulnerable. Stephen Brennan has seen his mother lose many of the friends and activities that gave her joy, and he cannot help wondering if he is watching a preview of his own later years.

"How can you not?" he said. "That's a problem all of us will face at sometime."

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A few doors down from Audrey Brennan, in another apartment on the second floor of Juniper Court, lives another lonely woman in a wheelchair, Angeline Tesch.

"I never expected to live this long," said Tesch, who turned 85 in October. "I figure I'd die by the time I was 28."

That's the age Tesch's mother was when she died in Gresham, northwest of Green Bay, after undergoing an appendectomy. Tesch had just turned 7.

She had no brothers or sisters. After the funeral, her father, who was unemployed, took her to live with an aunt in an old home that lacked indoor plumbing.

Tesch has been lonely for most of her life. In school and outside she was a loner, insecure about her family's home.

"It embarrassed me," she said. "I didn't want other children coming over. I'd been to their houses and everything was so nice."

She loved to read stories about knights and dreamed that one would come and rescue her from poverty. When she was 16, she joined a "lonely hearts club," corresponding with young men she'd never met. She exchanged letters with one for six months, a man in his twenties. At first, she told him she was 18. Later, she felt guilty and told him the truth. He never wrote back.

Tesch served in the Coast Guard and later spent 25 years working at the Post Office in Milwaukee, until a stroke in 2003 forced her to retire. She never married.

After coming to Juniper Court, Tesch grew curious about her family, and searched for surviving relatives. Her father and aunt had died decades ago. She tracked down a first cousin in Freeland, Mich. They talked on the phone and exchanged a few letters, but the correspondence lasted only a year or so. Then he died.

In 2014, Tesch put up a sign near the building's mailbox: "Do you know of anybody who would like to have the experience of helping a disabled woman with physical or occupational therapy."

She's still looking.

So, Tesch listens to public radio and old time radio shows like, "Gunsmoke" and "The Great Gildersleeve," which are broadcast a couple of nights a week on different stations.

Down the hall, Brennan sits with the television on, her mind drifting into the past, often into memories of her parents.

"I still can feel their love," she said, pleasure in her voice. "It's such a warm feeling."

In the early afternoon, Tesch and Brennan both receive their Meals on Wheels visits. Pat Sprung, who has worked for the program for 22 years, visits Tesch three days a week, Brennan five. She does her best to engage the women and make them smile.

"The population of elderly people in Milwaukee who are alone is phenomenal. It's like an underworld," Sprung said. "Other people don't realize how isolated they really are."

Tesch and Brennan live on the same floor of the same building — they have that much in common.

There is little bond in loneliness, though. Tesch and Brennan know each other by name and face. They say 'Hi' on occasion. That's all.

"Being down the hall," Tesch said, "it's like being miles away."

Coming Monday: You don't have to be alone to be lonely. The story of former Gov. Martin Schreiber.

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