

# SENIORS SUFFERING COVID BLUES



## Isolation stirs loneliness and depression for older N.Y.ers

BY CHELSIA ROSE MARCIUS  
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In recent weeks, Lezrette Hutchinson began to sense a subtle slump in her mood.

The 64-year-old retiree from the West Bronx no longer looked forward to phoning friends as she did in the early days of the pandemic, when they'd gab about what hand sanitizers they used, how they washed their masks and what their next meal would be.

More recently, she found herself heading to bed as early as 5 p.m., exhausted from a host of mounting frustrations: technological hurdles that came with virtual doctor visits; navigating the Social Security website; being alone in a one-bedroom apartment for the better part of seven months.

"One day I said [to a friend], 'I think I am developing some type of depression here.' That's what we kept saying to each other: 'Are we depressed?'" said Hutchinson, who also suffers from sarcoidosis, an inflammatory lung disease that puts her at high risk for contracting COVID-19.

"I used to love talking to my friends on the phone. I would talk for hours," she said. "But I didn't want to talk about [coronavirus]. I don't like talking on the phone anymore at all ... I'm losing interest in things.

"It's getting to us now. And I think it's getting to us because everything has changed."

Social-distancing measures implemented during the pandemic

**Lezrette Hutchinson (near r. and main photo) helps Maria Rivera (also above left), department director of BronxWorks, inspect walk-in cooler. Top r., Barbara Bova says she is making do with virtual activities.**



have led to an "epidemic of loneliness," according to a new AARP Foundation and United Health Foundation report, which found over half of adults age 50 and older said they felt isolated since the onset of coronavirus.

Of those who said they experienced social isolation, half felt unmotivated, 41% were very anxious and 37% said they were depressed.

A big part of the blues, Hutchinson says, is due to the citywide shuttering of senior centers, which suspended most in-person programming during the pandemic.

While many of the 250 city-funded centers and other affiliate sites offer virtual classes, deliver meals and connect

people with much-needed services, there's no telling when these social hubs will fully reopen.

"They want to make sure everybody's safe," said Hutchinson, who used to visit the BronxWorks Morris Innovative Senior Center several days a week. "I get that. But I want to get back to my life."

BronxWorks Department Director of Senior Services Maria Rivera said their Morris Ave. location is a lifeline for patrons. Staffers there have served hundreds of meals through its food pantry and made thousands of wellness calls to around 1,300 seniors since March while also providing a number of virtual services.

"Different people use different programs, they have different needs — and so that's what we're

working on right now, trying to get ready technology wise [so those programs] are available for the winter," she said, noting that the center was just approved to order more tablets and other smart devices for their clients to have at home. "We really need to work hard to make it happen for them."

Yet AARP New York State Director Beth Finkel, whose office serves over 750,000 people in the city, said the shift from in-person to online has been overwhelming for many older members, leading to increased feelings of isolation.

"Now the [isolation] numbers are so huge," said Finkel, who addressed the City Council Committee on Technology Tuesday regarding the importance of

internet access for all city seniors. "It's people of all ages — but it gets worse when you're older, and you're fearful of going out, [or] you have limitations in terms of your abilities to really live well in the tech world.

"As the bad weather comes on, it's going to be even harder for older people to keep up whatever minimal socialization they were able to [have] up to this point," Finkel added.

Barbara Bova, 72, who has lived in her one-bedroom East Village apartment since 1975, said she misses painting, Qigong yoga and other activities she took part in at the Greenwich House senior center — programs she discovered about two years ago after retiring from the New York University Law School admissions office.

Zoom has helped, she said, particularly sessions with members of her synagogue, and virtual comedy classes with comic Jo Firestone, a writer for "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon."

"It's not the same, but it's something," said Bova, noting her white Chihuahua-Jack Russell mix named Morgen has also given her some solace. "Then when you hear someone say, 'We're never going to get back to the same normal, it's going to be a new normal,' well that's hard.

"[I'm] doing what I can ... just getting through it being positive, trying to be positive," she said. "As long as we get back to some normal, we'll adapt ... We have to. What choice do we have?"

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