

Reaching Out and Keeping Connected in Pandemic Times

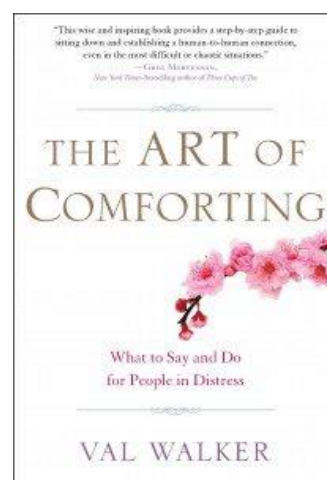
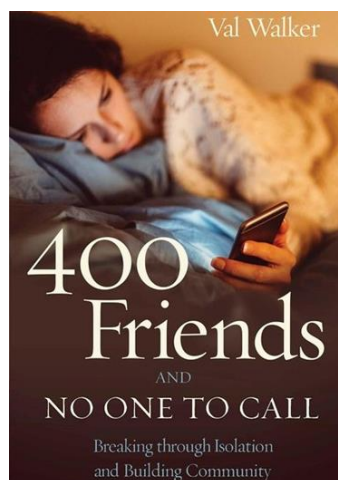
With Val Walker, Author, *400 Friends and No One to Call*

Even before COVID-19, it took courage and initiative to break out of isolation and rebuild our support networks. We may have already been strapped in isolating situations such as illness, caregiving, living alone, divorce, relocation, or the death of a loved one. In Val's program, we will explore and share ways to stay close to others and deepen our bonds, despite social distancing. And further, we will learn how to build our communities and expand our networks, paving the way for our future social life.

About Val Walker, MS

Val Walker is a rehabilitation consultant and contributing blogger for Psychology Today. She is the author of *The Art of Comforting*, which won the Nautilus Book Award and was recommended by the Boston Public Health Commission as a guide for families impacted by the Boston Marathon Bombing. Val's latest book is *400 Friends and No One to Call: Breaking Through Isolation and Building Community*. With a master of science degree in rehabilitation counseling from Virginia Commonwealth University, she has led support groups for twenty-four years for people living with chronic illness, disability, grief, and trauma. She lives in Boston and teaches and speaks throughout New England.

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OUTLINE: Reaching Out and Staying Connected in Pandemic Times

1. Loneliness and Isolation Prior to COVID-19

There already was a loneliness epidemic long before COVID-19. We examine how social isolation was already affecting our society.

2. The Impact of the Pandemic on Isolation and Loneliness

Social distancing magnifies the stress and vulnerabilities of people who are already isolated and lonely. We explore what is now happening according to recent research since the pandemic began.

3. What helps people break out of isolation, stay connected, and build community?

- **Helping Others, serving your community, and volunteering.** Helping others can make us feel less helpless and give us a sense of purpose. www.volunteermatch.org
 - **Support groups:** being part of a group where people are isolated from the same things as you are—and they understand you. (Groups for caregivers, chronic illness, grief, addiction.)
 - **Creative pursuits and expression,** making thoughtful things for other people (Beaded jewelry, greeting cards, woodcarvings, scrapbooks, paintings, stories, songs, facemasks)
 - **Sharing your favorite inspirations with others**—such as, music playlists, games, movies, books, podcasts, photos, Watch Parties on Facebook. These generate conversation and connection.
 - **Checking in regularly with others** with phone calls or teleconferencing. Keep a routine.
 - **Rediscovering and reconnecting with your long-lost connections:** cousins, friends, classmates, colleagues--expand your networks with past contacts.
 - **Connecting with nature,** walking in awe-inspiring places, gardening, animals (and you can share your passions and beloved birds and animals with friends and loved ones)
 - **Joining spiritual and faith-based communities and study groups:** Sharing your values, gathering for rituals, worship, inspiration, and having deep conversations
 - **Taking classes that meet regularly** where you can build friendships as you study together and share your interests and values.
 - **Being involved with a cause** you care deeply about and taking action (community activism)
 - **Getting individual support for yourself** and growing your understanding of yourself, either with a trusted confidant, friend, or with a therapist/mentor/coach. We need someone to talk to during these uncertain times.

4. Questions and Discussion

Instructor: Val Walker, MS vnswan123@gmail.com www.ValWalkerAuthor.com

Situational Forces that Isolate Us (Based on recent AARP Study and Cigna Study)

1. **Living Alone** (35% of adults over 60 live alone; 25% live alone under 60)
2. **Illness or Disability:** Mobility, Sensory or Cognitive Impairment, Mental Illness (a cause of social stigma)
3. **Major Life Losses:** Death of a Loved One, Divorce, Separation
4. **Socio-economic Losses and Stressors** (unemployment or underemployment, financial crisis or sudden change of status, loss of property, divorce/widowhood)
5. **Transportation Issues and Location/Neighborhood** (rural areas or lacking transportation)
6. **Being the Primary Family Caregiver**
7. **Being Estranged or Disconnected from Family** or Former Spouse/Partner (also domestic abuse or child abuse)
8. **Relocation**
9. **Outshining Others, Sudden Fame** (extreme success can be isolating)
10. **Extreme Events: Natural Disasters, War, *Pandemics***

Internal Forces that Isolate Us

(Some common forces, not in any order)

- **Shame of Being Lonely or Alone** -- "Something must be wrong with me."
- **Fear of Social Stigma**-- "People will judge me."
- **Anxiety, Social Anxiety, PTSD, Fear of Being Rejected or Disliked** -- "I avoid chatting-- too uncomfortable."
- **Unfortunate Life Experiences with Relationships**-- "I've been let down too many times."
- **Depression** -- "I struggle with having the energy or interest to 'get out there.' "
 - **Grief and Loss** -- "I'm still not ready to meet new people."

Forces that Help Us Break Through Isolation

- Sense of **Purpose**: “I reach out to others when I’m volunteering at the shelter.”
- Sense of **Meaning**: “I connect with others when I’m involved in what really matters to me—activism for the land rights of Native Americans.”
- Sense of **Belonging**: “Joining in Trivia Night at my local pub makes me feel part of my town.”
- **Being in Our Element**: “By the water I feel more relaxed and enjoy fishing with my friends.”

In interviewing people who have broken free from isolating life situations, I found that they followed one or more of these four motivations:

Following Your Bliss (your passion)

Following Your Curiosity: Love of Learning and Exploring

Following Your Caring/Compassion for Others

Following Your Healing Journey

Tips for Volunteering as a Way to Build New Connections

Volunteering helps us grow a sense of community, a sense of place—of belonging.

A few suggestions for making your volunteer experience more meaningful:

- If you want your volunteer job to help you build your social life, talk to your volunteer manager about how your role can enable you to meet and interact with people.
- Do a volunteering job where you can meet regularly enough with the same people, so you can develop relationships over time. It takes many months, if not years, to build solid relationships.
- You might create your own volunteer job, internship, or meetup that puts you at ease with others. Be proactive and advocate for a role you would like to offer to your community, particularly if you have the needed skills.
- Or you can start meetups. Go to Meetup.com.
- Make sure your volunteer schedule fits your energy level and optimal times for engagement with others.

Helpful websites and phone numbers for volunteering:

- Volunteer Match www.Volunteermatch.org
- United Way www.unitedway.org

- You can call 2-1-1 and ask a resource specialist about how to volunteer in your area.
- Community Teamwork Community Teamwork | Volunteer (commteam.org) Go to www.commteam.org
- Idealist www.Idealist.org Idealist lists great opportunities for volunteering and internships as well as job openings at nonprofits.
- Americorps Home | AmeriCorps <https://americorps.gov>
- Friendship Works <https://www.fw4elders.org>
- Habitat for Humanity, Greater Boston Greater Boston | Habitat for Humanity | (habitatboston.org)Initiatives and

Organizations Tackling Loneliness in the US

- **Connect2Affect** (AARP) connect2affect.org
This website is an ideal, user-friendly source for fighting social isolation, and helps people get more involved in their communities, especially if you are over the age of fifty. It is a wonderful resource for learning about isolation and loneliness. This AARP initiative publishes many studies and opens our eyes with evidenced-based suggestions for fighting loneliness.
- **The Unlonely Project**, Foundation for Art and Healing artandhealing.org/unlonely-overview/ The Unlonely Project provides excellent reporting on research about isolation and loneliness, and informs us about conferences and symposiums on fighting social isolation nationwide. The latest in news and media about loneliness is here. They also host a film festival featuring themes of loneliness, and many videos can be viewed on their website. Founder: Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH
- **Sidewalk Talk Community Listening Project** sidewalk-talk.org “Our mission is to nurture human connection by teaching and practicing heart-centered listening in public spaces,” their website boldly states. Started in San Francisco, California, this street initiative is active in most states around the US—in fifty cities and growing also in twelve countries. Volunteers trained to listen empathically sit on sidewalks with chairs in public places so people can conveniently sit down to talk about what is on their minds. This fast-growing project is also a great way to volunteer directly for fighting to end loneliness—right in your own community. Founder: Tracie Ruble

- **The Transition Network** thetransitionnetwork.org
A women's support network in many states.
- **Caring Bridge** caringbridge.org
This website is ideal for gathering support during surgery or illness. You will be able to organize your support network of friends, family, or neighbors with this innovative tool.
- **Wounded Warrior Project: Veteran Peer Support Groups** woundedwarriorproject.org
(Resource Line for Learning about Support Groups: 888-997-8526 or 888.WWP.ALUM)
Tackling the social isolation of veterans, the Wounded Warrior Project organizes veteran peer support groups for thirty-five states and is still growing. Groups offer peer led meetings and events across the country, including Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and Guam.
- **Village-to-Village Network** (for people over fifty) vtvnetwork.org
- **Stitch** (for people over fifty) stitch.net
- **Women Living in Community** (for people over fifty) womenlivingincommunity.com
- **Meetup** meetup.com
- **SAGE Services and Advocacy** for LGBTQ Elders sageusa.org Hotline: 877-360-LGBT
LGBTQ seniors are twice as likely to live alone and more vulnerable to isolation. This nationwide organization provides training, advocacy, and support.
- **The Clowder Group:** <https://www.allthelonelypeoplefilm.com/>
Filmmakers focusing on issues of loneliness and social isolation with documentaries such as "Gen Silent" and the upcoming "All the Lonely People."

HOTLINES and RESOURCES FOR LONELINESS, CRISIS, AND PANDEMIC RELIEF

- Crisis Line Text HOME 741741
- Call 2-1-1, ask for "Call to Talk" line in Greater Boston Area. Most states have 2-1-1 lines, also online at 2-1-1.org where you have a database of local community services and crisis call lines.
- SAMHSA.GOV Disaster Helpline, Pandemic Relief, includes Mental Health Assistance
www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline or call 1-800-985-5990