

## TURNING POINTS

### People Who Don't Need People

Are baby boomers deliberately disengaging or do they just not have time to socialize?

By: Clare Ansberry – July 19, 2018



#### ARE BABY BOOMERS antisocial?

Members of the baby boom generation, especially those 55 to 64 years old, are less socially engaged than people the same age 20 years ago, according to researchers at the Stanford Center on Longevity.

The big question is why, says Tamara Sims, a Stanford research scientist, who is collecting more data with her colleagues to figure out the answer.

Theories are already emerging. Boomers, especially women, are working more or devoting themselves to caring for parents, leaving less time to see friends or help out at church. They are interacting differently, perhaps joining an online literacy initiative rather than volunteering at a library. “They may be engaging in virtual ways not captured by the data,” says Dr. Sims, 41, who is organizing a conference on the role of social media in engagement.

Cathy Jones Parks would like to be more engaged but cares full-time for her 84-year-old mother, who has Alzheimer’s and lives with her. Ms. Parks still tries to go to church on Sundays, relying on her husband to stay with her mom, but has cut back volunteering there as a lector. Going to a movie, attending a wedding or taking trips means finding people to stay with her mom. In the rural area where they live, about 180 miles from Albuquerque, N.M., there aren’t many support services, like respite care.

“You just start not accepting invitations,” says Ms. Parks, 55, who gave up her job as director of a regional educational cooperative to care for her mother. “Your social life becomes doctors’ appointments and those sorts of things.”

One evening, she googled stress and caregiver and stumbled upon caregiving.com, an online support group. “It was such a relief to connect with other people who understood my story,” she says.

Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, engages socially with a small circle of family and friends. “I certainly find myself being more selective,” says Dr. Carstensen, 64. Neighbors and friends don’t just stop by the house, the way they did when she was growing up. Now when she hears the doorbell, especially at night and if alone, it’s almost alarming, she says.

Dr. Carstensen isn’t sure whether baby boomers are deliberately choosing to disengage and be anti-social or whether they don’t have time because of other obligations. “We don’t know that yet,” she says.

Mark Lohkemper, 63, says that 20 years ago, people around his age weren’t working as much and didn’t have lots of often-distracting technology to keep up with. That left them more time to spend family and friends or golfing and bowling. Today, he says, people interact on social media. Mr. Lohkemper, who lives in La Jolla, Calif., and owns a small manufacturing company, texts a childhood friend in New York at least once a day. “You couldn’t do that 20 years ago,” he says. Mr. Lohkemper considers himself something of an introvert and says social media helps keep him engaged. But he also says there is no substitute for time with friends. He has a circle of confidants who go out to dinner monthly and take vacations together at least once a year.

Mobility, in terms of both job and home, also can disrupt connections, says Kathryn Betts Adams, a former social-work professor who consults on aging. Dr. Adams, 60, who lives in the Hartford, Conn., area, has moved several times and left a longtime teaching job in 2013. “I’m probably less socially engaged,” she says, than she used to be.

It’s also possible that boomers are remaining independent and self-sufficient—just as they have always been. They questioned social norms and felt less obligated to attend church or join the Junior League and Chamber of Commerce. “Baby boomers do whatever they want,” Dr. Adams says.

The Stanford findings, reported in 2016, are based on surveys taken in 1995 and 2012. Among the questions was: “Do you have a good, important talk with your partner at least once a week?”

Dr. Sims is directing the research as part of the Sightlines Project for the Stanford Center on Longevity. Researchers used nine measures of social engagement, including interaction with friends and family, contact with neighbors, and community and church involvement. Among five age groups, the biggest drop in social engagement—and the only statistically significant decline— was among people 55 to 64, who were 5.11% less socially engaged than their same-age predecessors. That age group accounts for about half the baby boomer generation, which spans people born from 1946 to 1964, who are now 54 to 72 years old.

Being disconnected has its risks. Loneliness has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to a 2018 study by health insurer Cigna.

Lack of engagement also affects brain health. “The more social connections you have, the less severe the decline in memory,” says Elizabeth Kirby, a neuroscientist who teaches at Ohio State University. Dr. Kirby used aging mice to explore whether those who lived in groups performed better on memory tests than ones living in pairs. The mice from groups outscored the twosomes and also had less inflammation in the memory part of the brain, according to her study released this year. She suspects that being with a group requires more complex interactions, keeping the brain sharp.

Kathy Goldberg, a 63-year-old nurse who lives in Pittsburgh, has always been private and independent, but is probably more so since her husband, Phil, died 13 years ago. Their three sons are grown. She has no family in the area. Ms. Goldberg works long shifts and doesn’t interact much with neighbors, but does meet other dog owners when walking her poodle, Coal. “I’m social with people when I want to be,” she says. If she feels like swimming, she goes by herself. If she sees a friend at the pool, she says it’s nice to have the company, but not necessary.

“I’ve reached the age when I don’t do things I don’t want to do,” Ms. Goldberg says. But she wonders if she should socialize more, perhaps join a neighborhood book club. Her father, in his 90s, is very social and in good health.

Stanford’s Dr. Carstensen is concerned about what is lost if baby boomers withdraw from meaningful engagement. As a generation, they can provide much good—volunteering, mentoring, helping kids read—especially since they are healthier and more educated than previous generations. “To the extent that we keep to ourselves, that is not going to be good for our communities,” she says. “We need all hands on deck.”