

The Solo Journey: How to Thrive in the Fourth Phase of Retirement

Many Enter the Solo Journey Phase
Alone, But They Don't Have to Be Lonely



On November 21, 2019, with lots of fanfare, Elon Musk introduced his new Tesla pickup truck to the world. The launch featured two tests. In the first test, the lead designer hit the truck's door with a sledgehammer. It didn't even leave a dent. For the second test, Musk threw a metal ball at the shatterproof window. It shattered. Embarrassed, he said "There's always room for improvement."

Similarly, as aging adults enter the fourth phase of retirement, they're also testing. Many enter this phase alone. Adjusting to living alone requires trying out new things and experiences. Like the truck tests, some of these experiences will be smashing successes while others will be failures. But with a resilient attitude and some planning, retirees will find they can adjust and enjoy this phase of retirement.

In this article you'll learn:

- What's the Solo Journey Phase?
- Why it happens
- How to thrive in it

First, What's the Solo Journey Phase?

The MIT AgeLab calls the last period of retirement "The Solo Journey Phase." As the title implies, many retirees begin this phase by themselves. And there are lots of retirees in this phase. In 2021, 43% of women and 24% of men over 75 were living alone.¹

Since most retirees don't prepare for this phase, it can be one that people don't look forward to, filled with loneliness. People under 40 spend about 3.5 hours alone per day; that number jumps to 7 hours and 47 minutes for people 80 and older.²

In this phase, loneliness can be a serious problem for retirees as researchers have found that loneliness poses health risks. It can be as bad as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness can decrease longevity even more than being obese or physically inactive.³

Many Retirees in the Solo Journey Phase Spend Lots of Time Alone



Source: The older you get the more time you spend alone. That can mean more health problems, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 7/10/19. Most recent data available.

But the solo journey phase doesn't have to be a time of prolonged loneliness. With an open mind and knowledge of what resources are available, this phase can help retirees find a new sense of purpose, social engagement, and a time to reinvent themselves. This is especially true for people who may have spent years in a caregiving role, caring for a sick spouse or relative.

Second, Why the Solo Journey Phase Happens

So how do people end up in the solo journey phase? One reason is obvious—when a spouse dies, the surviving spouse enters this phase. But there are other contributing factors. The divorce rate for people over 50 has been on the rise and has doubled since the 1990s.⁴

More people are entering this phase because they have fewer children. Even if they do have children, they may not live nearby. Baby boomers had fewer children than previous generations. By 2030, 16% of women 80-84 will be childless, compared with 12% in 2010.⁵

People Who Live Alone Spend Lots of Time by Themselves

Daily time spent alone (hours: minutes) of all measured time, among those ages 60 and older



Source: On average, older adults spend over half their waking hours alone, Pew Research Center, 7/3/19. Most recent data available.

Health challenges can also cause people to enter the solo journey phase. A broken hip can wipe out your mobility, meaning you could be stuck at home and not able to go out and spend time with friends or family. Or a close friend could break a hip, meaning they won't be able to go out and have fun with you. Hearing loss can also contribute to spending time alone.

If people can't hear well, understanding conversations can be difficult and frustrating—so they might withdraw socially, avoiding spending time with people or participating in group activities.

Third, How to Thrive in the Solo Journey Phase

Just because retirees enter this phase alone, doesn't mean they have to be lonely or even remain alone. To avoid isolation, you or your loved one will need to make an effort to find opportunities to spend time with others. One way to do that is by volunteering. Find a cause (aarp.org/giving-back) you care about and sign up to help. Follow CDC guidelines concerning getting together with others.

Loneliness Is as Risky As



15 cigarettes a day



Consuming more than six alcoholic drinks



Being obese



Being physically inactive

Source: Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 4/29/21. Most recent data available.

Museums, hospitals, churches, animal shelters, and schools are always looking for people to help out. Scientists have found that seniors who regularly volunteer have a lower risk of heart disease and live significantly longer than those who don't. Plus, you'll likely meet others who share similar interests.

Apps can also help people find companionship. Stitch is an app that helps aging adults find companionship, and it's not only about dating. Stitch promotes the idea of getting together in groups. Whether it's a new movie, exhibit, or just dinner, they make it easy to meet others in a group setting.

Meetup is another way to meet other people in your area with similar interests through online or in-person events. Pick a category you're interested in and Meetup will let you know of any local events that are taking place. Plus, if you're not sure what you're interested in, Meetup offers a wide variety of group events on topics such as outdoor adventures, technology, health and wellness, photography, cooking, hobbies and crafts, and many more. In essence, this app can help you meet new people, learn new things, find support, get out of your comfort zone, and pursue your passions.

Remaining Independent—and Not Having to Move

In this phase, you'll likely want to maintain your independence and age in the home of your choice. Most want to stay out of assisted living or nursing homes if possible, and for good reason. The cost of those communities is high—the average annual cost for a nursing home is \$108,405 and \$54,000 for assisted living.⁶ Even though people want to age in their homes, if they're not safe, it might not be possible.

Technology can help you remain in your home. While people may initially be uncomfortable with the idea of being monitored, it can help avoid serious emergencies. Alarm.com's Wellness system uses sensors placed throughout the home to help caregivers know if there's a problem, such as forgetting to lock doors, skipping meals, or inactivity.

Smart speakers like Alexa can also help around the house. Alexa can be used as an easy tool to control the thermostats and lighting but can also remind people to take medications or even assist them in calling someone if they need help. Medisafe can not only remind people when it's time to take their medication and the correct dose but also when prescriptions are running low, whether to take the pills with water or food and what side effects might be attributable to the medication.

Getting Good Advice When You Need It Most

At some point, as you age, you may need to create caregiving plans to care for aging parents, or you may even need caregiving services yourself. When families care for their parents, it can cause tension or resentment. Some family members may feel like they're doing or paying an unfair share.

Decisions may need to be made about whether to move an aging parent into a child's home or assisted living. These are not easy decisions, and it can be hard for families to agree on what to do. A geriatric care manager, aka life care expert, can help families through these difficult decisions, including:

- Address emotional concerns and worries
- Coordinate medical services among several agencies
- Facilitate the discussion of tough topics
- Hire a team of caregivers and medical professionals
- Make care recommendations and home visits
- Make long-term and short-term care plans
- Navigate families through complex issues

For this reason, clear intentions and plans previously put in place, such as a power of attorney, health care proxies, and more broadly, one's preferences for care, can help make this period run smoothly and comfortably. Consolidating accounts into one bank, setting up online access to it, paying bills, and overseeing financial management can be handled from anywhere in the US by one person with a durable power of attorney for the aging parent.

This can also decrease the burden placed on adult children who would otherwise feel compelled to make decisions for, and sometimes, against the will of their parents. Elder law lawyers (agingcare.com/local/elder-law-attorneys) can draw up documents that make your intentions clear.

Maybe You're Thinking, "Oh No, This Phase Sounds Depressing."

As we age, as mental acuity and physical health may decline, it's natural to think happiness and well-being will also decline. However, that's not the case. Research suggests that older individuals tend to be happier than their younger counterparts. A significant body of psychological literature focuses on unraveling the reasons behind this positivity. It seems that older people excel in insulating their thoughts and emotions from negative situations, showcasing remarkable adaptability and coping skills.⁷

3 Things to Remember About the Solo Journey Phase

First, the primary risk of the solo journey phase is loneliness. Second, there are lots of reasons retirees enter this phase, including having fewer children, losing a spouse, increasing divorce rates, and mobility challenges. Third, retirees should find ways to engage with others in this phase. Apps can help connect retirees with people and the things they enjoy.

Entering a New Phase of Life is Rarely Easy

Whether it's moving to a new neighborhood, starting college, or starting a new job, life transitions can be difficult at first. If you've entered the solo journey phase because you've lost your spouse, you'll need some time to grieve. If you're feeling isolated, consider joining a grief group or meeting with a therapist. As you begin to adjust to this phase, experiment with new ways to spend your time, maintain your home, and make new friends. You'll be surprised that some of these attempts feel like failures, like the Tesla window test, but over time you'll figure out what works and what doesn't. Eventually, you'll embrace this phase as you build new relationships and routines.

Next Step

If you're in the solo journey phase, strive to find ways to spend quality time with others. This week, visit [Stitch](#) or [Meetup](#) to find events that interest you.

Sources:

- ¹ Historical Living Arrangements of Adults, US Census Bureau, 11/21. Most recent data available.
- ² The older you get the more time you spend alone. That can mean more health problems, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7/10/19. Most recent data available.
- ³ Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 4/29/21. Most recent data available.
- ⁴ Why More Couples Are Divorcing at Older Ages (and After More Years of Marriage) Than Before — and What You Can Do to Avoid It, *Everyday Health*, 6/2/23
- ⁵ 4 Steps to a Happy Single Retirement, *Kiplinger*, 4/21. Most recent data available.
- ⁶ Cost of Care Survey, *Genworth*, 2022
- ⁷ Retirees Tend to Be Happier than Younger People – Even If Their Finances Aren't Great, *Center for Retirement Research*, 10/24/23

This article is based on concepts from *8,000 Days— An entire phase of your life waiting to be invented* by Joseph Coughlin, PhD, director of the MIT AgeLab.



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