

FAMILY CONNECTION

Americans of all ages are coming together in 'intentional communities'

By Jeffrey Kluger

THERE'S NOT A LOT TO DO IN SYRACUSE, N.Y., WHEN YOU'RE living alone and a storm dumps three feet of snow on the city. A dinner with friends would be nice; so would a yoga class or a shared movie. And when that's done, it would also be nice to have a bit of that wintertime solitude watching the snow fall from the privacy of your own home.

At one place in Syracuse, all of that happens on those long snowy nights. Commonsplace is a cohousing community on the fourth and fifth floors of a restored 19th century office building. The community is made up of 25 mini apartments that are fully equipped with their own kitchenettes and baths and open into a larger shared chef's kitchen, a library nook, a coffee lounge and a media room. The residents live together—sort of—in private apartments that are, once they step outside their doors, no longer private. They're part

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of a growing trend in an increasingly lonely country: "intentional communities," or clusters of residences made up of a few dozen apartments or homes built around central squares or common spaces with the goal of keeping people connected.

Humans may not always get along, but the fact is, we can't get enough of one another. There are 7.6 billion

of us in the world, but we inhabit only about 10% of the planet's land, and roughly 50% of us live on just 1% of that land.

"We evolved to depend on social connections," says Dr. Vivek Murthy, a former U.S. Surgeon General, "so much so that if we are feeling disconnected, that places us in a physiologic stress state." According to Murthy, that state is as dangerous to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer and more.

It's hard to come by a firm count of how many intentional communities exist in the U.S. Only about 160 of them have been built from the ground up, but the Fellowship for Intentional Community now lists 1,539 groups that have used existing homes to establish cohousing arrangements.

There are communities like Commonsplace in many major cities. There is Milagro in Tucson, Ariz., 28 homes built around a central green with a shared community center and other facilities. There is Village Hearth Cohousing, a similar setup in Durham, N.C., intended for the LGBTQ community.

The Commonsplace model is the simplest. "We set everything up with a town-square feel so that when you come out of your door there's not a long, dark hallway like in most



Residents of Commonsplace in Syracuse, N.Y., often make dinner together

apartment buildings," says Troy Evans, a Commonsplace co-founder.

Nearly all of the people who call Commonsplace home are millennials, and they tend to be transitory, with the average length of tenancy just eight months. Things are different at communities like Milagro in Tucson. There, the buy-in is typically for life. The investment in house and land means an equal investment in the community.

"For families with very young children, we do baby-care trades," says Brian Stark, a married father of two who has lived in Milagro since 2003. "And having a supportive community to help as you grow older is also a wonderful alternative to assisted-care living."

The physical benefits of human connections are well established—provided they're real. Murthy worries about the number of people whose social lives are reduced to social media, which can be isolating and even dangerous. In a recent meta-analysis, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, found that adults who are lonely have a 50% greater risk of dying within a given period than people who are more connected. The cause is stress triggered by loneliness, which weakens the immune system and other bodily functions.

Certainly, not everyone who is lonely dies from the condition—but they hardly thrive either. Intentional communities, in their quiet way, may heal both the body and the mind with the simple balm of other people. □

50%

Percentage increase in risk of early death among the lonely, compared with the non-lonely

42.6 million

Number of Americans estimated to be suffering from chronic loneliness

SOURCES: JULIANNE HOLT-LUNSTAD, PROFESSOR AT BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY; AARP