

# LIVING WITH THE PANDEMIC

BY AGGIE JORDAN

How have we retired people been responding to the pandemic? Is our response as a group any different from those people under the age of 60 who are still working?

During the last two weeks of June of this year, after much of the nation had sheltered in place for 12 weeks, I conducted a survey using Google Form to find the answers to those questions. Of the people over the age of 60, 74 were retired (10 were working but still claimed retirement). About half of those retired are residents of SCSH. Almost a quarter of the 62 workers are teachers. All 136 considered themselves sheltered-in-place with the exception of those who worked outside their homes. Of the 136 people who answered the survey, the population spans 16 U.S. states.

## “DESCRIBE YOUR PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE. WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE FOR YOU?”

This was the initial question on the survey to allow an answer without any prompting. Nearly half of both groups (47% retired and 53% still working) found their experience very anxious. They used words like “isolated,” “worried,” “anxious,” “scary,” “burdensome,” “very sad,” “miserable” and “depressing,” and “locked up.” A few qualified with additions like, “but I coped,” or “lonely except for my dogs.” Some actually stated that they enjoyed the change the pandemic created. Feelings of isolation weighed heavily on both groups, but those still working tended to be more concerned about their futures and the country’s course.

### Differences

The differences between those retired and the workers were in the details. When they were asked to check multiple choices, the differences became greater. In addition to the anxiety expressed (above), the only other factor both groups clearly agreed upon (75%) was that they saved money.



Although a large percentage of both groups admitted to cleaning out closets, cabinets, and drawers, those retired had the edge at 73%, while the younger group checked in at 60%. Evidently the older group had more years to accumulate unwanted goods.

In this study both groups had an equal representation of being married or living with a partner (77%). Yet, of those retired, 50% said they deepened their relationships with their partners; while fewer (35%) of the younger workers claimed that they did.

Another difference that clearly emerged was the response each group gave about family. Of the working younger folks, 73% loved the time they got to spend with their families; only 13% of retired folks had that opportunity.

The single population (21%) was almost equally distributed among both the retired folks and the workers. Somewhat surprising was that very few of them complained about being alone.

A significant difference existed about how both groups viewed having friends in their lives. A large percentage of those retired, 90%, missed visiting with their friends both individually and with planned social activity. Of the workers, 58% missed visiting with their friends.

But this survey was not all about statistics. The respondents all had the opportunity to clarify their negative and positive experiences. We were not surprised by the answers of either group.

## What Was Positive?

	THOSE RETIRED	THOSE STILL WORKING
THE VALUE OF TIME	Spending more time with one’s partner to deepen relationships, find new ways of becoming closer; enjoying quiet time (journaling, meditating, praying, etc.)	Being able to slow life’s pace and attend to small details – less hustle and bustle, more self-reflection, greater perspective
PROJECTS	Getting long-overdue things done around the house, experimenting with new recipes, gardening	Learning new skills (art, cooking, baking), completing chores, reading, studying
SOCIALIZING	“Zooming” with out-of-town family and friends, phoning/emailing old friends, meeting new and old neighbors while walking	Spending quality time with partner and children, “Zooming” with grandchildren, no social demands
LEARNING	Writing stories, a play, or music; doing crafts, painting; learning new technologies online	Completing classwork, studying for a PhD, learning to teach online; working from home
THE BOTTOM LINE	“I can cope.” “My partner and I are OK together.”	“Developed closeness with partner.” “Family is ‘safe.’”

## What Was Negative?

	THOSE RETIRED	THOSE STILL WORKING
SHELTERING IN PLACE	Feelings of isolation (not going to movies, church, shopping, the gym, out to dinner). Disliked being told what to do by the HOA Board. Tired of cooking. Feeling “locked up.”	Feelings of isolation, too many demands from family (especially taking care of children while working from home); not enough “alone time.”
LACK OF HUMAN INTERACTION	Missing socializing and hugs, not seeing others outside immediate family, not having friends to the house, not playing cards, unable to visit friends in the hospital	Missing family celebrations (especially birthdays and graduations); needing to be sensitive to others; “no social life”
WORRIES / CONCERNS	Personal health and catching the virus, fearful that family will catch it; concern about grocery shopping. Financial health of the country; lack of political leadership and mixed messaging from the government.	Overall “uncertainty” and anxiety; frustration about how long sheltering in place will continue; inability to plan; lack of expert information and political leadership; fear of losing job or visa
ANXIETY	Generalized anxiety, fear of “the unknown”; uncertain about politics of the pandemic and its effects	Depression, stress, no happy vacations; lonely for adult interaction; ate and drank too much; gained weight; deaths of parents and friends
THE BOTTOM LINE	Is there a clear “path forward?”	“Being alone took a toll.”

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# LIVING WITH THE PANDEMIC ...continued

## Summary

From these descriptions, we can conclude that feelings of isolation weighed heavily on both groups.

The retired folks seemed to switch from enjoying their planned activities, which had been shut down, to creating new activities in order to fill the time. The workers had their time filled by their work, their families, and their responsibilities.

Although the families of the retired folks were all grown and mostly independent, the workers for the most part still had responsibilities for their families.

It was clear that those who were retired had been worried during the pandemic, but the workers were more stressed with uncertainty and difficulty coping with mental health issues. Most workers did not indicate that they enjoyed quiet time or much time to create.

## How did both those retired and the workers view the future?

The **younger workers** were quite uncertain about the future. Their most frequent concern was whether they would remain employed. Other concerns zeroed in on their finances, their health and that of their families; the future of the country; political impacts on our democracy; what education for their children will look like for students and teachers; future regulations and limitations on outside activities; and socializing limitations. Humans beings are made to socialize and touch, several told us. So, they wondered what will happen to our friendships, our support from others. One believed that "electronics will distance us."

The **retired** folks were also uncertain and concerned about the future. Their biggest worry was whether everyone would follow the rules of wearing masks, washing their hands, and keeping their social distance. They generally believed that the virus will remain a serious threat until we have a vaccine for everyone. They intended to keep their social circle to a few people.



As people who value travel during their retirement, they saw travel being redefined, the country's tourism affected. The future will never be the normal we knew. Change plus fear of COVID-19 and new viruses is their view of the future. Only a few people expressed any hope for the future without a vaccine. One person summed it up with, "The future social, economic, and emotional equilibrium is problematic." The most frequent advice from those retired was to stay positive, hopeful, have faith, and hang in there as we await the vaccine.

## Acknowledgement

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