

What It Means to Be an Elder Orphan

I'm an elderly person with no children, siblings, or parents. I need more resources to navigate major life decisions.



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I'm an "elder orphan," a solo ager, someone who is aging alone. That may sound depressing until you learn that the American Geriatrics Society calls me and my ilk "unbefriended." Yikes.

An elder orphan is someone "of an age" who has no immediate family in their life. No parents, spouse, siblings, children, or grandchildren. They may have immediate family, but the relatives live too far away to be of assistance in times of crisis. There's another scenario, as in my case, where my immediate family and I are estranged.

This means there is no one to help me with major life decisions as I age, such as moving into a smaller home or to a warmer climate. There's no one to take care of me when I'm sick or incapacitated (mentally or due to a fall or accident). No one to help manage daily chores, including shopping and writing checks to pay bills. In a worst-case scenario, someone who doesn't know me might be tasked with making emergency medical decisions on my behalf, including choices I might not have made. Fortunately, I'm in fairly good health, and I see my doctors on a regular basis to help keep me that way. But still, I worry.

Statistics are woefully inadequate when it comes to how many of us elder orphans there actually are, though data suggests that elder orphans — not including those with estranged families — may represent 16 to 20 percent of the U.S. population. By 2035, people who are 65 and older will **outnumber** people under 18 for the first time in history.

That's not that especially far from now, and I can attest that the United States is woefully unprepared for the reality of more elder orphans. Anthony Sahlender, an executive associate at the Maryland Department of Aging, says elder orphans are a growing concern, especially "when people don't have the ability to make medical decisions." When someone hasn't named a guardian, they become a ward of the state, and an expense.

And yet there are not many places I can go for information on navigating the elder orphan life. So, for the most part, I find myself turning to Facebook, where my peers have created dozens of

pages dedicated to the solo-aging population. It's in these groups that I am told what kinds of questions I need to start asking myself and what parts of my life I need to get in order.

For example: Who do I list as my emergency contact? Who will have my power of attorney? Who will take care of my pets when I can't? If I have a medical procedure, who will drive me to and from the appointment and stay with me for the night? Where do my financial assets go when I die?

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The questions are fair, though the process of thinking through the logistics of my lonesomeness can feel dark. There's also not much being done to help me and others prepare. The state of Maryland is working on a unique Senior Call Check program, where anyone age 65 or older can sign up to receive a daily call at a set time to make sure the person is awake and functioning. Some individual civic and religious groups also have such programs, but Maryland's is a first for a state-based initiative. Another telephone reassurance option is available through [Programs for Elderly](#), where scheduled calls can be made to check in on elderly individuals.

But even if I were to set up such a service for myself, most programs require a contact person "in case of emergency." Finding or naming someone who can be available at a moment's notice is hard when none of your options are family members.

While this may all sound disheartening — insert a woeful sigh here — there are also a lot of advantages to living alone and unattached. I ran an unofficial survey on a Facebook page dedicated to elder orphans, and my fellow "unbefriendeds" came up with a few benefits. "My time is my own to do as I wish," wrote a jewelry designer from San Diego. "I can change my mind at the last minute. In a word, independence."

"I'm not mired in dysfunctional dynamics from which there is no escape," a nurse said. Another woman in the group added, "No one asking for loans for a home, car, or other worthwhile or worthless reason."

For me, the upside of living alone means there's no one to tell me not to eat a double scoop of ice cream, which I know I shouldn't do, but what the heck? I don't have to answer to anyone.

Of course, the obvious downside is the possibility of loneliness. But for me, that's a matter of perspective. Realizing you're not dependent upon someone else to entertain you is empowering. I keep busy with traveling, attending seminars or classes, or volunteering. I am happy and fulfilled. Sure, being an elder orphan means living alone, but it doesn't mean you're lonely.