

Question: *I consider myself to be fairly young for a polio survivor (I'm in my 30s). I would like to meet other polio survivors near me. There is a support group where I live, but I worry about the age gap and whether I'll fit in.*

Response from Rhoda Olkin, PhD:

Entering any group that knows each other can be intimidating. But there is much to gain in meeting and hearing from others who survived polio. And of course, you may find much in common, as well as several differences.

Having polio more recently and being younger than most polio survivors means that there are probably several differences besides current age. You might be from another country that received the vaccine later. Or you might be from a religion that doesn't endorse vaccines. You may be more mobile and active because of your youth, or you may be just beginning to experience and come to terms with some new symptoms of post-polio syndrome. You might be raising children who are still in the home, or be in your peak working years.

And being younger puts you in a different cohort than older folks. Many of us over 65 were raised in the era of "use it or lose it." We pushed ourselves hard, only to enter the more recent era of "conserve it to preserve it."

Having pointed out the differences, here are some of the similarities. Many of us experience pain and are masters of pain management. Some have histories of trauma associated with the polio onset, recovery and medical procedures. We know about relevant disability laws

and can spot curb cuts fifty feet away. Some of us use mobility devices, from canes to crutches to scooters to manual or electric wheelchairs. We fall into a generally higher income bracket than people with other types of disabilities and have higher rates of marriage. We use some "insider" terms such as "polios" or "chairs" (wheelchairs). We struggle as we age with signs of growing older, but we enter this phase with some expertise in workarounds and fall prevention techniques.

"... there is much to gain in meeting and hearing from others who survived polio. And, of course, you may find much in common, as well as several differences."

I can appreciate the worry about fitting in (I worry about this and I'm the same age as many people at the meetings!). But I hope it won't stop you from going to meetings. There is little to lose (an hour or two) and much to be gained.



Dr. Rhoda Olkin is a Distinguished Professor of Clinical Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Francisco, as well as the Executive Director of the Institute on Disability and Health Psychology. She is a polio survivor and single mother of two grown children.

Question: *I think I'm experiencing a bit of pandemic fatigue. I know that I don't have many good years left to travel and be active, yet I realize it's not very safe to do so right now. I've seen many of my friends return to normal life even though cases are still high. I don't think I'm ready to do that, and it's causing me a lot of anxiety.*

Response from Stephanie T. Machell, PsyD:

It sounds like you're afraid that by the time you feel it's safe to travel and be active, your good years for doing so will be completely, or nearly, gone. It also sounds like watching your friends getting on with their lives is causing you to feel like you're missing the fun you imagine them having, and that wondering when you'll feel ready to join them and/or berating yourself for not being ready is making your anxiety worse.

People's risk tolerance varies. Unlike you, your friends are comfortable with the risks involved in returning to "normal" life. Because risk tolerance is a personality trait, it is unlikely that you can change yours.

It's hard not to focus on all you wish you could do, everything you miss doing, and when things will return to "normal," especially if you're also focused on how many "good" years you will have left when it does (something it's unlikely you or anyone else actually knows for certain). Shifting the focus away from these things is unlikely to get rid of all your anxiety, but it will reduce it. Rather than trying to force the worries away, accept them as normal during uncertain times and let them be. Or write them down and save them for a scheduled "worry time" of 15 minutes each day.

Then put the focus on what you can enjoy right now. If you're tired of your usual routines and activities, try something new. There are a multitude of virtual options available, including concerts,

theatre and dance performances, lectures and classes on every topic imaginable, and groups for people with shared interests. There are even virtual tours that allow you to preview the places you might like to visit when that becomes possible. The skills needed to find and access these activities are well within the reach of even the most technophobic. If there are in-person activities that are within your comfort level, make time to do those.

Feeling more in control may help, too. If you haven't already, think about what would make you feel safe enough to resume specific activities. Consider whether the enjoyment an activity will provide is greater than the anxiety it may provoke and give yourself permission to forego those that make you uncomfortable. Don't allow others to pressure you or make you feel bad that your choices differ from theirs.

Also consider when travel might feel comfortable for you again, as well as whether there is any kind of travel that feels safe now. Use this time to research locations and develop itineraries. If your concerns about travel becoming more difficult are more than ageist and ableist assumptions, plan to take more difficult or extended trips sooner. If booking future travel now would help you feel better, look into cancellation policies and travel insurance.

And remember, the money you've saved not traveling during the pandemic may allow you to take the trip (or trips) of your dreams! ■

Dr. Stephanie T. Machell is a psychologist in independent practice in the Greater Boston (MA) area. She specializes in working with those affected by polio and other physical disabilities. Her father was a polio survivor.

