

Developing A Living Solo Group

Introduction

Living Solo is a group of solo agers in Beaverton, Oregon that provides opportunities to share and support each other as solos. The initiator successfully began and developed this group by knowing the audience, planning effectively, and conducting well planned meetings with clarity of direction and purpose.

Subsequent to developing the concept and processes, the Living Solo Group was formally approved to be one of the many active groups offered by Viva Village (vivavillage.com), a member of the Portland area Villages NW Hub and Spoke Nonprofit Network.

Purpose of the Living Solo Group

To encourage solos to share their experiences, information and resources, to form connections and to get and give mutual support.

Audience for the Living Solo Group

Solo Agers include the following:

- * People who have lived solo all their lives.
- * People who were previously partnered but have been living solo for many years.
- * People who were partnered for many years but have recently attained solo status due to death or divorce.

Solo Agers have the following different attitudes about their status:

- * For some, living solo is a conscious choice.
- * For some, living solo is a welcome status, mostly positive.
- * For some, living solo was never a life choice and comes with negative feelings.
- * Probably all have a mix of feelings about their solo status.

When forming a Living Solo group, it is important to have clarity about who "qualifies" as a participant. Viva Village chose to be very open to a variety of life experiences and life situations. Our Living Solo Group welcomes and includes:

- * Life-long solos.
- * People who have been living solo for a significant part of their lives or for just a few years.
- * People who have children - nearby or far away - but who consider themselves to be living solo.
- * People who anticipate that they will be living solo in the future and want to prepare for solo aging.
- * Solos with shared living arrangements
- * In essence, participants in the Living Solo Group can "self-define" as solo agers.
- * When starting a group, it is important to think about inclusivity or exclusivity of the group.

Preparation for Development- Step I: Identifying Interest

Potential participants can be found by communication with one or more of the following:

- Your friends and acquaintances who might be interested in a Living Solo Group.
- People who your friends identify as possibly being interested in a Living Solo Group.
- * Solo agers in any social group or club in which you participate, such as a coffee club or a walking group.
- * Local Facebook friends to identify contacts with other solo agers.

Interest can be determined in one or more of the following ways:

- * Offering to facilitate a discussion on solo travel for a local senior travel group.
- * Establishing a Meet-Up Group.
- * Suggesting a class for solo agers to a community senior center.
- * Working with leadership at your organization to develop a solo agers group.
Keep in mind that only about five people are needed to start a group.

Preparation for Development- Step II: Piloting the Idea

- * Make a list of Solos, with their names, phone numbers, and email addresses and use as a distribution list.
- * Research and make a list of the subjects/topics that would be of interest of Living Solo including aging as a solo.
- * Develop the purpose for a Solo Living Support Group.
- * Explain the purpose to each person and/or organization on your solos list and invite them to a meeting.
- * Conduct group meetings for a pilot project.
- * Evaluate the topics, process, etc. to assess the viability of a Living Solo Group in your community. Make revisions as necessary before proceeding.

Preparation for Development- Step III: Developing a Planning Team

- * Following the pilot project, develop a Planning Team of skilled Solo Agers who have specific necessary skills to plan and conduct the group meetings. It is important to include but not limit the roles/skills to resource specialists, mental health specialists, and project managers.
- * Proceed to the Planning phase for establishing a long-term Living Solo Group.

Planning Phase for the Established Living Solo Group

The topics discussed by the Planning Team before beginning the long-term Living Solo sessions were as follows:

- * Need for the format in which to meet. Depending on the need, the meetings can be conducted via zoom or in person.
- * Need for effective facilitation. All the Planning Team members met the following criteria to facilitate the sessions:
 - * Had previous facilitation experience and expertise
 - * Were willing to facilitate on a rotational basis
 - * Were open to continuous improvement as per feedback
 - * Can keep the discussion uplifting and positively navigate hard topics and discussions

P#3

- Need for ground rules to be used. The following were identified:
 - * Follow the discussion processes identified by the group.
 - * Use "I" statements to speak from your own experience.
 - * Acknowledge and respect diversity of ideas, cultures, experiences and identities.
 - * Know that one person should speak at a time. Wait your turn.
 - * Respect that this is a confidential space.
- * Possible topics that could be addressed in the sessions. The following were identified as examples of topics that could be covered:
 - * Travelling as solos
 - * Managing finances as solos
 - * Making relationships as solos
 - * Enjoying the holidays as solos
 - * Challenges and tips (to meet challenges) for solos
- Best dates, times, format, and frequency to conduct Living Solo meetings.

Ongoing Planning

The Planning Team decided on an ongoing process to ensure the success of each Living Solo session.

We decided to hold a planning meeting each month to discuss the following:

- * An evaluation of the most recent session and ways to make changes needed to maximum effectiveness.
- * Questions to pose for the topic chosen by the group for the upcoming session.

Examples would be:

- * Topic: Traveling as a Solo
- * Questions for the discussion:
 - * How many have travelled as solo travelers? If so, why? If not, why?
 - * What are the challenges for solo travelers?
 - * What are the best tips to make solo travel enjoyable?
 - * What are good resources for solo travel?
- * Best facilitator for the upcoming session
- * New resources that could be shared with the group.

Preparing for and Conducting the Living Solo Group Sessions

Preparing for the Session

At least five days before each session, a Planning Group representative emails the topic and questions for the upcoming session. If the session was to be conducted as a zoom meeting, the zoom link was published.

Conducting the Session

- * The facilitator welcomes everyone and encourages participants to mingle.
- * The facilitator makes announcements such as the following: upcoming events of interest to solos, new resources identified, Let's Go events (as described below), etc.
- * The facilitator opens the discussion using the questions previously published. He/she monitors the adherence to the ground rules. If the mood and discussion become too negative, he/she guides the group to discuss tips to address challenges. This sets a more positive tone.

- * The facilitator watches the time and wraps up the meeting.
- * The facilitator thanks all for attending.

Helpful Documents

The following documents are kept up to date and distributed to all participants:

- * A contact list/distribution list for all Living Solo participants.
- * List of upcoming topics in order of priority, as identified by the group.
- * A list of resources: pod cast, articles, etc.

Let's Go Events

- * Purpose:
 - * To encourage members to connect by initiating opportunities for activities.
 - * To promote semi-spontaneous fun and relaxation in a supportive environment.
- Connecting: All have a distribution list with all names, emails, and phone numbers.
- * Process:
 - * Any Living Solo Group participant identifies the time and place of an event to which they want to invite the solos.
 - * The participant, the initiator of the event, sends out the following information to all solos or selected solos on the distribution list:
 - * Name of person hosting the event
 - * Date/time and location of the event
 - * Description of the event
 - * Additional helpful notes, if necessary
 - * Reminder to only respond if the participant plans to attend and not to reply all.
- * Examples of a Let's Go event:
 - * Dinner at a favorite restaurant
 - * Northwest Senior Theater "That Holiday Feeling" performance
 - * Holiday event at Farmington Gardens
 - * Light Opera performance
 - * A symphonic concert
 - * A winter solstice celebration
 - * Movies

A Testimonial

I have been solo since my now 41-year-old daughter was 5 years old. I thought I had the solo thing down until I joined the solo group. Being solo and aging is another thing altogether! I discovered that I was not exactly attending to so many issues the group was

addressing. Being one of the facilitators made it very important that I get on board.

Learning so many practical tips and discussing issues were so important to me. I was excited to learn about putting medical information on the fridge for paramedics in case of emergencies for example, to address emotional issues such as isolation and feeling disconnected from others, and to build a community of solos that have my back.

I am feeling more connected and am now included in a positive community with activities that meet so many of my needs. My life is full and productive, and I am less disconnected from my peers. I am feeling included in having fun as well as having a place to connect.

Jeanne Cory

Many thanks for the following for developing and working on the Living Solo Planning Group:
Sara Sheets (as the initiator), Jeanne Cory, Kathe Fradkin, and Gerry Lukos.

