

Join a Club: It's Good for You

'Join or Die!' is a new documentary highlighting why connection increases our well-being – something social scientist Robert Putnam has been talking about for 25 years

By [Elizabeth Fishel](#) | January 15, 2025 | [Living](#)

When my husband retired three years ago, he knew he needed more structure, stimulation and camaraderie in his life after a long career that provided all those things. He decided he'd join a book club, not an unusual solution, but first, he needed to start one.

Before long, he'd recruited his brother, his brother-in-law and his closest friend, and boom, the Hogwarts Book Club was born. The guys now meet every other month on Zoom and share a lot of laughter and connection along with their book talk.



A historic club from Netflix documentary 'Join or Die!' | Credit: Abramorama/Delevan Street Films

According to the new documentary "[Join or Die!](#)" streaming now on Netflix,

he made one of the best choices possible for his health and longevity.

As first-time filmmakers, siblings Rebecca Davis, 41, and Pete Davis, 34, argue in this lively and persuasive doc using animation, statistics, interviews, illustrative examples and news clips: making social connections by joining a club, any club, can dramatically increase your well-being.

"People used to bowl together, in leagues. Now they bowl alone."

The doc showcases a rainbow of club members from the 200-year-old Independent Order of Odd Fellows to the Homebrew Computer Club (founding member: Steve Jobs) to today's nationwide Red Bike and Green urban biking club of Black cyclists. It also celebrates the life and

work of the Harvard social scientist, Robert Putnam, 83, who was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2012 by President Obama for his groundbreaking research that became the 2000 bestseller, ["Bowling Alone."](#)

Putnam's book focused on the period from 1965 to 1995 and chronicled the decades-long decline in community connections and civic engagement and its regrettable contribution to social disintegration.

The "Bowling Alone syndrome" is the shorthand for this phenomenon, a kind of anti-civic epidemic. Putnam took the phrase from a friend who owned a bowling alley that was on the skids. "People used to bowl together, in leagues," he told Putnam. "Now they bowl alone." It turned out to be a bad trend for beer-and-chips sales and even worse for society.

Recommended

Tracing the Lonely Path of Our History

An interview with the author of 'Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness'

Sobering Statistics About Connection

The film picks up where the book left off — because, if anything, these

patterns of [disconnection](#) have only intensified in the 25 years since "Bowling Alone" first appeared. In the 21st century, Putnam observed, fewer and fewer Americans are socializing through membership organizations.

Some somber statistics that the filmmakers cite:

- 50% decline from the '70s to the '90s in the number of times Americans attended a club meeting
- 35% decline from the '60s to the 2020s in religious congregation membership
- 60% decline from the '70s to the '90s in the number of picnics Americans attended

What accounts for this nosedive in societal connectivity and networking — or what Putnam calls "social capital"? Rampant computer and cell phone use are the usual culprits, plus shrinking local newspapers and decreasing union membership. And with the dominance of social media, people are more likely to connect over Facebook and FaceTime instead of in person.

The uptick in women entering the work force, while an overall positive, also leaves less time to join groups and volunteer. Worsening economic inequality and greater [political polarization](#) have also kept people apart, not together. The result: a fraying social fabric, increasing isolation among citizens and a great loneliness epidemic. The political ramifications are also striking.

Over the last 25 years, Putnam has become the "Johnny Appleseed of Joining," doing whatever he could to turn this anti-civic trend around.

**"If you join groups,
you'll have a higher
lifetime happiness
quotient."**

Married for sixty-one years to the love of his life and his adjunct researcher, Rosemary, father of two and grandfather of seven, Putnam is an engaging and brilliant speaker with a distinctive clipped white beard.

Robert Putnam's Message

In an interview over Zoom with Next Avenue, Putnam said, "I've talked to

probably half a million Americans in thousands and thousands of towns all over America," referring to the seeds of connection he's spread.

Now the film can be his megaphone and his message is crystal-clear.

"Your chances of dying over the next year are cut in half by joining one group," he explained. "And that's not just me, that's all the people who study public health who know that that's true. If you join groups, you'll have a higher lifetime happiness quotient. You'll have a higher lifetime income and you'll live longer."

And being a joiner is not just good for the individual; it's good for your neighborhood, your town and the whole society. For example, as Putnam put it, "In a neighborhood where people are more connected with one another, the crime rate is lower. And indeed, if you wanted a lower crime rate in your neighborhood, you could do one of two things. You could spend more on the cops or you could know one another's names. Technically, it means eyes on the street. People are looking out for one another, and the more people look out for one another, the less crime there is."



Robert Putnam | Credit: Abramorama/Delevan Street Films

The same is true for education: you could pay teachers more, or you could have more parents join the PTA. Or, ideally, both, but as more parents get involved, the quality of teaching and learning go up and schools become

more hospitable.

The heart of Putnam's message — and the title of the documentary — "Join or Die!" is a play on Benjamin Franklin's 1754 political cartoon which was the first to go "viral": an image of a snake, cut into thirteen segments to represent the Thirteen Colonies that won't survive unless it pulls together.

"That's the pun," Putnam pointed out. "Unless we all join together, our democracy will die. Part of it refers to the personal benefits to you from your joining. And partly it refers to the collective benefits."

As concerned and passionate Millennials who grew up in Falls Church, Virginia as the children of activists, Rebecca and Pete Davis are part of a younger generation who are seeing the fall-out of the Bowling Alone syndrome in their own lives.

Rebecca was covering the issue for NBC News as a producer; Pete, as a Harvard undergraduate, had a wake-up call in Putnam's seminar "Community in America."

Life as a Joiner

"It was a total lens shift on government," he observed in a Zoom interview with his sister. "We walked into the class thinking the center of politics was in D.C. We walked out knowing it's neighborhoods, unions and friendships."

"Making these connections that we're talking about is much more important for older people than even a health check-up."

Putnam's work takes the long view, offered Pete. "It took a lot of time for civic engagement to devolve and it won't turn around overnight. We need on-the-ground organizing, neighbor to neighbor, group to group."

Their film is one important step of many, and they're spending the next year using it as an organizing tool and screening it around the country to groups as small as 25. So far they've had 3,500 requests to show the film.

The typical reaction after seeing it: "I want to join a club."

Putnam and the filmmakers are especially fervent about the crucial value of community involvement for older people. Explained Putnam, "As you get older, your connections tend to die. That's just a fact of life. And so, therefore, there's a greater risk of loneliness and social isolation. So making these connections that we're talking about is much more important for older people than even a health check-up."

Putnam himself has always been a joiner, including bowling with a league as a youngster. He's had to step back from some former commitments, like singing with a [choir](#), because of his busy travel schedule, but he's still active in two neighborhood associations.

His wife Rosemary (whom he calls "the social capitalist in the family") keeps the social fabric of the family strong with multi-generational dinners, visits and birthday cards—and is the first one to bring soup or flowers to a friend or neighbor who's ailing.

Another case in point is Rebecca and Pete Davis's mom, Mary Clare Gubbins, 77, who taught them from childhood that community activism brings joy — from passing out flyers at school about a recycling program to starting a mother – daughter [book club](#) that's been meeting for 30 years.

When Gubbins retired in 2019, she said, "I didn't want to be 'a lady who lunched.'" Instead, she volunteered to make meals at Miriam's Kitchen, a food and social services organization that addresses chronic homelessness in the greater D.C. neighborhood. "Being part of your community lifts you," she said.

From Gubbins's meal-making to my husband's book group to my writers' group of 40 years to my friends' knitting, hiking, poetry reading, gardening, political-postcard-writing, coffee-drinking clubs, "bowling" *together* is making lives and society richer, one group at a time.

Elizabeth Fishel is the author of five nonfiction books including *Sisters* and *Getting To 30: A Parent's Guide to the 20-Something Years* (with Jeffrey Arnett). She has contributed to numerous magazines including *Vogue*, *Ms.*, *New York*, *The Writer*, and *Oprah's O*. She has written for *Next Avenue* since 2014. [Read More](#)