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Ten Lessons in Neighborliness from a Cohousing Community

Here's what Courtney E. Martin has learned from ten years of living in an intentional community in Oakland, California.

BY COURTNEY E. MARTIN | APRIL 9, 2024

The headlines are everywhere: Americans have fewer close friends and spend more time online. Men, in particular, are suffering the consequences of not feeling seen and connected; many lack relationships of mutual vulnerability and authenticity. Working families are exhausted and overwhelmed–trying to duct tape all kinds of solutions to systemic problems like the childcare crisis and the creep of work expectations into non-work hours. Young people are struggling mightily. It's enough to make you want to put a blanket over your head and never leave the house.

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But, in fact, you should do the opposite! Emerge, connect, get your hands in the soil and your feet on the pedals of a bike. You can start by becoming an intentional, committed, and creative neighbor.

I feel so strongly about this because I have spent over a decade now living in an "intentional community"–a place where people come together over shared values and purpose. I moved in 2013, at 33 years old, from a fairly large pre-war apartment building in Brooklyn, NY, where I knew only one neighbor despite many attempts to reach out. I had always been interested in intentional community, so when my husband saw a Facebook post from an old acquaintance announcing she was leaving her home in a cohousing community–private homes clustered around a shared space–we jumped on it.

This jump wasn't without anxiety and controversy. We didn't know anyone already living there. To get started, we attended one shared meal and wrote a letter on how we thought about community–that was the sum total of our "application" process. We had also never known anyone who lived in a cohousing community, so didn't have any reference for it in real life. My dad, whose financial advice I had always followed up until this point, thought it was a questionable choice to buy our first home in what seemed to him to be a more formal version of the hippie communes of the 60s. *Would it have resale value? Would my neighbors turn out to be weirdos?*

It is not, in fact, a hippie commune. Truth be told, we are a group of ten households that are religiously, professionally, economically, generationally, and politically diverse, and part of what makes our interdependence work is structure, not loosey-goosey living. In our community, we eat together once a week in an industrial-sized kitchen and dining area, and do work on our common spaces and courtyard one Saturday a month. In between, we tend bees, co-parent small children, bring one another soup, and so much more. We irritate and disappoint one another, buoy and care for one another, and probably most importantly,

make one another laugh regularly. We are living into this time of overlapping crises and so much opportunity for reimagining how we live together.

Since there are only 160 cohousing communities in the United States, you probably don't live in one. Even so, I've learned some things from mine about neighborliness that could improve any neighborhood. No matter your housing and neighborhood context, here are ten lessons for more interdependence and less loneliness in this beautiful, terrible time.

Sharing unlocks abundance. I didn't know the first thing about gardening. My neighbor Louise knows everything about the garden; in her mid 80s, it helps her stay vital and healthy to work in the garden and she likes passing on her knowledge. Together, we make a pretty great team. The other day, her hands were hurting, so she sat in her chair in the middle of the garden and directed me. She was the brains, I was the brawn. If I were on my own, my kids would not be eating basil and kale straight out of the garden and if Louise were on her own, she might not have anyone to teach or to share her food with or help her out. Together, everything gets tastier, cheaper, and generationally healthier.

The author's daughter wanders through their cohousing community.

Neighborliness is for introverts, too. Quite often when I tell people that I live in co-housing, they are thrilled and say, "Why doesn't everyone live this way?" But sometimes I get a far different reaction: "I'm an introvert. I think cohousing would drive me crazy." The surprising truth is this: because cohousing is structured and intentionally attentive to different kinds of personality types, introverts thrive here. No one is expected to be social all the time, and we all know one another well enough to know who the introverts and extroverts are, and who is a mix of the two. Being neighborly doesn't

mean being chatty. Ideally, it means being in relationships deep enough that you know what feels good and what feels invasive to the people around you.

The tiny things add up to a big feeling of mutuality. How many times have we shared our milk across the backyard fence because our neighbor, Sarah, needed some for her morning coffee and sent a text message SOS? I can't count. The other day her husband Jon came around with a gallon of milk for us as a sort of accumulated thank-you, so we had one less trip to the grocery store that week. The support is as small as a cup of milk, but the overall feeling of being physically close to people who can make your life easier, safer, and sweeter is huge.

Proximity is key. So often the ways in which my neighbors and I are able to support one another is only possible because we live just a few feet away and either run into one another in the courtyard or respond to a spontaneous and rapid request. Louise knows that split-pea soup is comfort food to me, so when she makes a batch, she often drops off a small container of the stuff for me to eat or freeze. If she lived even a few blocks away, the gesture would take more forethought and communication. Instead, it's just a right turn in the courtyard and

she's on with her day knowing that she's been a surrogate mother for a working mom who longs to be nurtured, rather than do all the nurturing.

Nourish the soil with gratitude in order to weather the tough times. Let's be real, it's not always easy living in community or being neighbors. That's why it's imperative that you have regular practices around paying attention to what's wonderful and expressing it. In our community, one neighbor created an appreciation board, where we drop little notes and gifts for people, and we often start a meeting with a round of gratitudes. It helps us stay centered on what works, not just what's challenging, about living interdependently. Life, too, is full of hard seasons. In our community, we've weathered unemployment, disability, loss, and so much more. It's great to have a group of people that can hold you in the harder seasons, and that means celebrating in the lighter ones.

Kids get to be what they can see. In a nuclear family (rarer as they may be), kids usually only have one or two grown-ups to fashion themselves after and learn from. Not in a community or network of neighbors! Kids get to try on all kinds of grown-up personalities, choices, professions, and gender-expressions, among so much else. Are you a boy who imagines doing something artistic–then Revy, a graphic designer, or John, an architect, are worth

watching. Girls in the community get to watch women who never chose to have children live full, interesting lives alongside women who did choose to become mothers–another big win for the breadth of their imaginations about their future selves. It's a cornucopia of adulthood–and they deserve all of it!

Cross-generational beekeeping in Courtney Martin's cohousing community.

Neighbors make great companions for ritual. We're an interfaith community, so we take turns sharing prayers and rituals from our traditions. It's an amazing way for us to all learn about one another's religions–Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity of various flavors–

and also understand that even those without formal religion have rituals of our own, as well as sacred beliefs. This also doesn't have to be religious! A happy hour on a Friday night or a Saturday kids' movie on the lawn are fantastic cultural rituals that keep us all feeling woven into a fabric of life, ever more comforting in these uncertain times.

Sharing is great for our aching planet. Our community solar panels reduce our monthly bills to around $10 a month, a laundry line cuts down on water usage, bikes help us avoid fossil fuels, a tool shed supplies us with what we need so we can repair things when they break instead of buying new things. The list goes on and on. While each of our individual families might be overwhelmed by the prospect of fixing a broken dishwasher or sorting out plastics for Ridwell Recycling, which we've just started doing, there are enough of us around with a variety of skills and energy, that we can usually figure out how to do the most sustainable thing together. Just as "many hands make light work," many brains make less stress. It doesn't mean we don't still struggle to reduce our individual Amazon-ordering or afford electric cars, but it's easier to do the right thing when there's a bigger group of people committed to it.

We're safer together. We live in urban Oakland. The other day I found a woman who was having a psychotic break sitting in the chair in front of my house. I tried to bring her a glass of water and coax her on, but didn't have any luck, so I knocked on doors around me and found a couple of neighbors that could help me gently encourage her to find another place to rest. We didn't have to call the police and I knew I had back-up for dealing with a sad situation. That wouldn't have happened unless I had invested in those relationships before I needed them. We had a shared value-system, which involved staying gentle. When a lot of crime seemed to be happening around us, we called an impromptu community meeting to process our feelings around it. We all felt better after that meeting. We couldn't change the city and its economic inequality overnight, but we could stick together.

Intergenerational neighborliness is a win-win-win-win-win-win-win-win-win. Our ages from four years old to 86, and that heterogeneity is key to our collective thriving. The youngin's offer energy, delight, and a sense of hope. The elders offer perspective, wisdom, and remind us to slow down and move at the speed of real relationships. Everyone in between has various gifts, skills, and ways of shaping their days and contributions.

Neighbors of different generations not only need one another, but they delight in one another. And that delight is an inexhaustible resource of vitality.

About the Author

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