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## Love Thy Neighbor?

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*By Tamara Lytle*

**The economy, a changing society and more have led to a marked decrease in civility, but not everywhere. Neighborliness can survive—even thrive—in your community.**

In a fast-paced, stressful world, the "neighbor" part of neighborhood can get lost. People still show up on doorsteps with a serving of food and sympathy for sick residents, help fix up the property of needy homeowners or chat while dog walking and at barbecue gatherings. But on too many corners, neighbors scream at each other over perceived slights, refuse to acknowledge one another in the hallway, hurl profanities during meetings or turn up the music in the wee hours when someone next door complains.

Pete Philbin, a Northern Virginia attorney with Rees Broome, recalls the noise offender—a 20-something grandson of a resident. After the sleep-deprived neighbor complained, the young man responded by turning up the music and stomping around the unit he shared with his granny. The grandmother relied on him too much to do anything about it, so the board resorted to a fine and multiple letters until he moved out.

"I have seen a marked decrease in civility over the years," says Philbin, whose firm advises 1,000 community associations.

The sparks for these flash fires of non-neighborliness often are noise, dog waste, parking, association spending and property upkeep.

In the case of a Redmond, Wash., condominium, a proposal to change the bylaws to limit rentals caused the uproar. Dennis M. Dennis, an organizational psychologist, was president of the Windwood Village Owners Association board. He organized a survey to gauge residents' interest in the measure. Soon, the anti-rental faction was shunning him and disparaging him at board meetings. Dennis opposed rentals, but was vilified for wanting to hear all sides on the subject.

Dennis says the incident mirrored research in psychology about the rise of narcissism, or when people put their own needs ahead of the common good.

"People who are bent on being uncivil, it's hard to stop them," says Jim Main, CMCA, PCAM, of Capital Reserve Consultants in Portland, Ore., and a former manager in Minnesota.

At a large suburban Minneapolis association, a down-on-her-luck resident had a decrepit shed, a disintegrating sidewalk and other property problems. Outraged neighbors kept coming to meetings to complain and sometimes spread misinformation, Main says.

Main hooked up with a local non-profit that has a fix-up day for the properties of needy people and got 25 association residents to volunteer. The house was repainted, the porch repaired, the shed torn down. And the discontent quieted. (The complainers were not among those who volunteered to help.) The event became an annual project and built connections and neighborliness among the association members.

A friendly, neighborly atmosphere adds to peace of mind for residents.

"Civility is extremely important. It's not old fashioned. If people are uncivil, it dampens your feelings about where you live," says retired clinical psychologist Gerald Amada, whose homeowners association north of San Francisco is a place where people bond over cutest dog contests, social events and warm meals of the sort that were delivered by neighbors after his wife's death.

A lack of neighborliness can suck up precious neighborhood resources, including time during meetings and legal fees to settle disputes, says Kara Cermak, CMCA, AMS, PCAM, president of Rowell, Inc., in Elgin, Ill., which manages 31 associations in the Chicago suburbs. She had one small condominium building where an upstairs neighbor came downstairs to scream at a couple about the noise level as they were moving in. "That kicked off a feud that has lasted five or six years now."

## **Uncivil War**

Cermak sees several factors causing outbreaks of non-neighborliness. One is the strain the economy is placing on people worried about losing their jobs; another is seeing home values decline. "Now you throw in a community association that is charging them monthly for things that are absolutely necessary but not in front of their faces," she says.

"People are so much more apt to fly off the handle than they were before," she says. One resident who lost her job is suddenly barraging Cermak with complaints, like people parking in the wrong place.

"She is suddenly angry and accusatory and has sent some e-mails that contained profanity," says Cermak, who had gotten along with the resident just fine for 10 years. "She has gone from someone I could communicate with to someone I communicate with as little as possible. She has literally told me, 'I am going to ride your butt and get what this association fee is worth every day.' Apparently it feels better to pass along the unpleasantness to someone else."

David Rossiter, CMCA, AMS, principal of Trestle Community Management in Redmond, Wash., and a neighbor of Dennis, manages seven associations in that area. He says the rise in delinquent fees has strained neighborly relations. He hears people suggesting the association shouldn't maintain buildings where delinquent residents live. "They are just spreading the venom and bad blood and turning people against the person who is not paying."

The economy also has caused people to downsize from single-family homes that weren't part of an association. Some of those new owners have a hard time making the mental jump to community living with its common property, documents and rules.

"They think the grass behind their condo is theirs, and they get bent out of shape when someone walks across it, when in fact it's common area," Rossiter says.

Philbin says he sees it too. People don't understand community living and behave badly toward boards and residents who try to enforce association rules. Their attitude is: "You're not my boss. You don't wear a badge, and you're not my parent. You can't tell me what to do."

Dennis agrees.

"If you are going to live in an association of any kind, you have to stop and ask, 'How am I going to balance my own needs, desires and interests with those of the common good?' " Dennis says.

In return, association living can offer a common sense of identity and connection that can help homeowners reap the rewards of neighborliness and friendship in a sometimes unfriendly world.

It's not just the economy that threatens neighborliness. A changed society also has an impact—from the prevalence of entertainment where people treat each other badly to a sometimes-nasty political discourse and a busy population with pockets of serious selfishness.

Amada, the retired Bay Area psychologist, grew up in Newark, N.J., where folks sat on their front porches and spontaneously invited neighbors over for a refreshment. Now, he makes a practice of stopping by the homes of new neighbors to introduce himself and tell them where to find him if they need something. He sees a societal agreement that neighborliness is important. But people don't always live up to their own ideals.

One of his own neighbors repairs cars in his driveway and leaves them up on cinderblocks—oblivious to the blight that is irritating neighbors.

Sometimes it's hard to spot incivility because it's so common place, says Amada, who has written books about disruptive college students and regularly advises colleges on the topic. Bad behavior breeds more of the same as people displace their own mistreatment onto someone else, he says.

The harried pace of life doesn't help, Cermak says. In retirement communities, neighborliness lives on when people run into neighbors as they are out walking and know what's going on in the community. "Those of us in the rat race don't have the time," says Cermak, who never got around to meeting her own neighbors for a year after she moved. "People mistake people not being around for not being neighborly."

### **Instant Reactions**

Some managers partly blame technology for the lack of neighborliness, though researchers say the opposite may be true. The instantaneous nature of e-mail, social media and texting allows people to lash out in the heat of the moment, Philbin says.

"People will say things in e-mail that they would never say face-to-face," Rossiter says.

Cermak agrees e-mail can lead to some unneighborly communication. "People's filters go away. You can't see the person, you can't get their reaction. They throw everything but the kitchen sink in there and some profanity. When you are communicating face to face, you are less apt to insult them."

Anonymous blog posts and other electronic communication where people don't have to identify themselves also can create a malicious environment, says Dennis, the former board president.

"Yes, people can be nasty to each other online, but there's also robust evidence of altruism and groups coming together," says Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project.

Technology hasn't caused people to hole up and disconnect from real encounters with others, including neighbors. Rainie says research shows that people who use social networking, for instance, are more engaged in group activity than nonusers. "People aren't transferring rich encounters for diminished virtual encounters, they are blending these worlds together," Rainie says.

A Pew poll showed that in recent years more people know their neighbors. In January 2011, 28 percent of those polled said they knew all their neighbors—compared with 18 percent in July 2008. The percentage who said they don't know any of their neighbors dropped during the same time from 29 percent to 23 percent.

Rainie says the bad economy could be a factor. "Maybe people are hunkering down in their neighborhoods and figuring they better know their neighbors," Rainie says.

The increase in neighbor relations also may be related to the concurrent rise in social media, according to Rainie. Electronic connections can help neighbors learn about each other. "You don't necessarily need to have long over-the-fence conversations. They are filling in the portrait of their neighbors without necessarily even conversing."

A Pew study released in 2010 showed that 20 percent of adults used technology to talk with neighbors and keep up with community issues. And 22 percent signed up for e-mail or text alerts about community news.

Face-to-face communication was still the top way to relate to neighbors—46 percent had spoken in person to neighbors about issues.

Steven Clift is building electronic connections between neighbors in his own Minneapolis neighborhood and throughout the country through [e-democracy.org](http://e-democracy.org). His nonprofit group hosts community dialogue online.

"When neighbors know each other, they tend to help each other," Clift says. "There's an innate interest to know the people who live near them. It makes them safer. It makes them happier in their neighborhood."

Clift sets up forums for neighborhoods to communicate everything from the time of the next anti-crime meeting to setting up children's play groups.

His own neighborhood once was the sort of place where everyone headed out together on hot summer evenings for a dip in the lake and got to know each other while waiting at the butcher shop. Air conditioning, television, big box stores and a transient society have made it harder to know neighbors. In an era of cell phones, Clift points out that sometimes it's hard even to know the phone number of the family living three doors down.

Clift got 15 percent of his own large neighborhood of 5,000 homes to sign up for an electronic forum linking them. It prompted formation of a dad's-night-out group, connections between home brewing hobbyists and the creation of a community garden, among other things.

"It has brought out some vibrancy and helped (neighbors) become familiar with people who live a few blocks away," Clift says. "One of the key things about the Net is you can use it to get people out of their homes and meeting their neighbors." For example, when a city park director let the forum participants know he had rented an inflatable slide, hundreds of people showed up at the lake—just like in the old days.

## **Building Neighborliness**

**Use technology.** Clift recommends that homeowners associations set up some sort of online forum for their members to connect. Just make sure to set up rules for civility and require that people use their real names, Rainie says.

**Set a good example.** Boards can encourage neighborliness by setting a good example: running meetings in a civil tone and giving people a chance to be heard.

**Broadcast the rules.** Boards also can encourage neighborliness by constantly reminding residents of the rules. "The more you can hammer it home, the more people will comply," Philbin says.

**Get the neighbors talking.** Managers and boards need to empathize with homeowners who have disputes with their neighbors, but should let residents try to work things out first when the dispute doesn't violate rules, says Cermak, the Chicago area management company president.

In the past three years, she has seen a rise in incivility over noise issues. "It's one thing to be frustrated and angry," she says. "It's quite another the first time you complain about something, you throw out profanity. It's a trigger reaction."

Sometimes, staying out of the way is unavoidable. One downstairs neighbor, for instance, was outraged that a mother with a newborn was walking through her home at night to calm the baby. Cermak was pulled into the dispute and had to explain that walking is permitted, under the association rules. But she also suggested to the mother that she walk in a different room.

Mediation also is helpful, but it's not often an instant solution. "I don't find in mediation people suddenly work it out and are happy with each other. I see that they see another perspective and are more tolerant," Cermak says.

Rossiter has seen a one-on-one approach work more often than not. "We always encourage our homeowners first—unless someone is waiving a gun—to talk to their neighbor," he says. But, about half the time, residents outright refuse—a big change from even a few years ago, according to Rossiter. "They want the association to be their attack dog."

**Set up a committee of resident mediators.** Associations often have talented homeowners—people who have worked as judges or lawyers—who might volunteer to mediate neighbor disputes. "Some people just have a knack for that thing," Cermak says. Just make sure not to use gossipy people who will end up fanning the flames, she warns.

And using fellow homeowners to deliver the message has more weight than if it comes from management. "It's peer pressure," says Cermak. "More than anything, if you know three people had to sit down and talk about you and your neighbor and how you are swearing at each other, it's embarrassing."

Some of the disputes aren't even covered by association rules. But a good mediation committee will buy into the belief that improving relations between neighbors can improve the environment for everyone, Cermak says.

**Don't play.** Sometimes, getting someone to shape up can involve ostracizing them, Amada says. Some uncivil people are what he calls "disruptive celebrities" because everyone knows who they are. He had one at the tennis courts of his single-family development. The man was so loud and obnoxious on the court he was infusing discontent into the neighbors' leisure time. The association was worried about lawsuits and loath to intervene, so Amada led the charge to refuse to play with the man. Ostracism "is a very powerful force."

**Bring neighbors together.** Bringing the community together for meetings and social events builds neighborhood bridges. Getting people involved in committees, encouraging them to come to meetings and garage sales, and sponsoring social events that get them talking with each other all help, says Main.

Dennis agrees. People who are engaged in community activities and personally know their neighbors are more likely to think about the common good. Otherwise, "if all you do is come home from work, you just get annoyed by who didn't bring in their garbage."

"Anything where you can bring people together gets people talking to each other," says Main. "They'll find something in common and realize we're all in this together."

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