



Dan Oppenheimer, left, says he increasingly relies on texts to communicate, writing long and detailed messages. His wife, Patty, prefers to keep her texting circle small.

Plugged in and in touch

Older adults are embracing technology, harnessing new tools to keep communication lines open

BY GARA TRAGER
Special to Newsday

Jacqueline Watkins' cellphone rarely leaves her side. "I hear better on the cell than the landline, and because I keep it near me, I can answer it right away," said the Amityville resident, 76, who has two children and four grandchildren. "I tell my daughter that it's like my alert button."

A cellphone user for the past 10 years, Watkins has increasingly added texting to her communications for many reasons, including to converse with her daughter throughout the day and share news, as well as birthday and funny emojis, with her fellow church members. She also texts with her

grandsons, since it's generally their preferred method of staying in touch. Since the pandemic, Watkins, who retired four years ago as a mental health facility's clinical case manager, has also embraced Zoom to virtually attend church services, meetings and Bible study

groups. "I was adamant about not wanting to do Zoom at first, but it's convenient and helpful," she said. "Whether a consequence of the pandemic or an evolving recognition that the digital age comes with myriad helpful options for keeping in touch

with friends and family, many Long Island senior citizens have incorporated a host of 21st century technologies into their arsenal of daily communications. And in looking ahead to a post-pandemic time, they anticipate staying connected with family, friends, their community and business associates with the communications technology they have

See SOCIAL TECH on E16

Making the connection with

SOCIAL TECH from E15 created or used with its adopted frequency since March 2020.

A HYBRID FUTURE
Rabbi Irwin Haberman, 68, of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Glen Cove, can't envision a future without Zoom. He favors a hybrid form of services — involving on-site and remote attendees — to become the norm.

Even before COVID-19 surfaced, the rabbi said he had observed the value of Zoom in not only serving as an alternative to on-site attendance at synagogue gatherings but as a tool to make belated and live congregational programs more accessible to people of all ages. "In order to come to a synagogue based service, people would have had to get dressed and go into their cars to join us, but video was more convenient and an acceptable way to attract more people," Haberman said.

In that end, in November 2019, he introduced Zoom to his congregants for the observance of Brit Milah, or the Night of the Broken Glass, which recalls the Nazi-organized pogrom that vandalized Jewish businesses and homes in 1938 and led to the murder of Jews in Germany and Poland.

The following month, on the eighth day of Hanukkah, Zoom proved the way for the synagogue's members to come together remotely to light their menorahs. Since then, Haberman and his congregation have expanded the deployment of video-chat technology to offer remote access to different programs, including High Holy Days, Friday night and Shabbat morning services, which draw worshippers from eight states and three Canadian provinces, as well as members who have relocated beyond the community and want to stay connected to the congregation. "And in the past 18 months, grassroots organizers haven't only replaced in-person events but have become guests, hostesses and speakers, with deceased individuals' family and friends, including those who



A cellphone user for 10 years, Jacqueline Watkins has added texting to her communications and uses Zoom to participate in church.

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live as far away as England and Israel, remotely joining graveside attendees "in real time," Haberman said. "Zoom has opened up our imagination, services and programs to greater possibilities," said the rabbi, a Montreal native. Plus, this summer, a video chat gave him the personal joy of catching up — over lunch — with two long-ago friends who are brothers and live in Canada. "Zoom provides an opportunity for face-to-face intimacy," Haberman said. "We're not turning back."

PRODED BY PANDEMIC
Although baby boomer Dan Oppenheimer has continued his pre-pandemic practice of occasionally mailing handwritten notes on postcards, which feature his photographs to convey such sentiments as holiday wishes or condolences, the pandemic has driven the Cathedral Gardens resident to increase his digital communications, particularly texting. "No longer using the app only to confirm an appointment," said Oppenheimer, who is semi-retired and serves on boards in Hempstead Village and town. "It's also doing more Facebook posting, emailing in my personal life and Zooming for business."

In varying ways, Long Island seniors' adoption and widespread use of digital communications mirrors a national trend among older adults. An AARP 2021 Annual Tech Trends Survey found that 50% of seniors joined the video-chat field during the pandemic and are using it more now than before, and 60% expect to continue to video chat at their current levels in the post-pandemic period. Beyond the pandemic, 24% anticipate logging onto video chats less, but 9% expect to use them more than they currently do, large and town. "It's also doing more Facebook posting, emailing in my personal life and Zooming for business."

Based on research focusing on older adults, Berg said, seniors can reap myriad benefits from using video technology, including having a "lower risk of depression and expect-

new skills



Rabbi Irwin Haberman's Congregation Tifereth Israel in Glen Cove uses Zoom to provide remote access to programs and services.

encing decreased loneliness, a strong sense of connection and the ability to maintain existing relationships." Along those lines, Pew Research Center survey, conducted in April, found that since February 2020, 40% of seniors between ages 50 and 64 and 40% of those 65 and older said that text messaging or group messaging apps helped them "a lot" to stay connected with family and friends. "Voice calls afforded the same benefit to 72% of 50- to 64-year-olds and 44% of people ages 65 and older, while 26% of individuals 50 to 64 years old and ages 65 and over felt video calls helped them in

the same manner. Still, digital communications are no substitute for in-person gatherings with family and friends, Berg said. "We are social beings and hard-wired for human touch." Oppenheimer's wife, Patty, considers herself a victim of digital-communication overload. When the pandemic hit, Patty, then employed as a marketing executive at a publishing company, not only started working from home but her immersion in technology, including Zooms, emails and texts, grew "exponentially" to keep pace with an escalating workload.

MIND YOUR Ps AND Qs

With today's diverse modes of communication, everything from video chats to texting is laced with the possibility of oversteering the bounds of politeness, according to David Ives Scrimm, the great-grandson of Emily Post and co-author of the Amazon bestseller, *The Etiquette Book*, from the Emily Post Institute in Waterbury, Vermont. "There are some of Scrimm's tips showing good manners in the digital age."

PHONE CALLS, EMAILS, TEXTS
● Be cognizant of recipient's communication styles and connect with them in the way

they are most comfortable. ● In the company of others, excuse yourself briefly to answer a call or respond to a text — prioritize the people in your presence. ● Limit texts to brief messages containing "who, what and where" and follow up with a phone call for additional details. ● Subject lines in emails should communicate the gist of the message. ● Send an "oops" with a brief apology after emailing or texting an unintended recipient.

VIDEO CHATS
● Acknowledge participants' arrival with "hello" or "hi" and their departure with a "goodbye." ● Before using FaceTime, call the intended recipient to ask permission for a video chat. ● Before starting a Zoom session, make an effort to ensure a good connection so as not to delay its start. ● Position the screen's camera to give the impression that you're making eye contact. ● Upon noticing people showing signs of fatigue, being the video chat to an end.

— GARA TRAGER



Irene Dicker has been getting help from TechTime in Syosset for various technological issues and guidance to use Zoom on different

family, friends and their community during the pandemic, about 30 older Long Islanders turned to TechTime for help in navigating the digital age. The 77-year-old Syosset firm offers group and private lessons on technology to businesses and individuals, said Wendy Weiss, the company's owner. Irene Dicker, a Great Neck senior and retired principal since June 2015, initially turned to Weiss for guidance in using Microsoft Word to edit her forthcoming self-published book, "Happy Thanksgiving Line," which draws on her personal and professional experiences with children. Since then, Dicker has also tapped Weiss for assistance with a range of technology issues, such as navigating the multiple chats that pop up simultaneously on her screen and using Zoom on different

While the video-chat app has expanded Dicker's life socially during the pandemic, enabling her to virtually attend synagogue functions and meet with her family and friends, COVID-19 isn't the only development motivating her to log onto video chats. "The inauspicious tradition" of the Cross Broom Expressway, which she travels to visit relatives in New Jersey, has also driven her to Zoom. "The road trip should take 23 minutes, but because I can't take as much as I've been, Dicker said, "I try not to drive there and, in addition to risk, get from my daughter, I use Zoom as an alternative."