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Virtual Women's Institute group is a 'lifeline'



FAMILY HANDOUT

Pauline Ellis said the virtual WI meetings have been a "lifeline" for members

Elizabeth Baines

BBC News, Yorkshire

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Synonymous with jam and Jerusalem, the Women's Institute has been connecting women across the UK since 1915.

While more than 7,000 branches meet regularly in person, there has been a rise in the number of virtual groups, with some members describing the online meetings as a "lifeline".

Pauline Ellis, from Bingley, West Yorkshire, has been a member of the "Sassy Lassies" virtual Women's Institute (WI) group since 2023.

The 70-year-old discovered the online meetings after being diagnosed with osteoporosis and osteoarthritis, which left her unable to walk without an aid.

"I have a very high pain threshold, but there were times I nearly gave up I just couldn't cope with it," she said.

"I had always been extremely independent, no matter what adversity, I had always carried on.

"This came out of nowhere and weakened me."

The years of pain and dwindling mobility left her reluctant to get out and meet new friends.

She said she remembered the importance of the WI to her mother, but felt she did not have the "mental strength" to go to a physical meeting herself.

"I didn't actually feel I wanted to go out to a new place to meet new people at that time," she said.

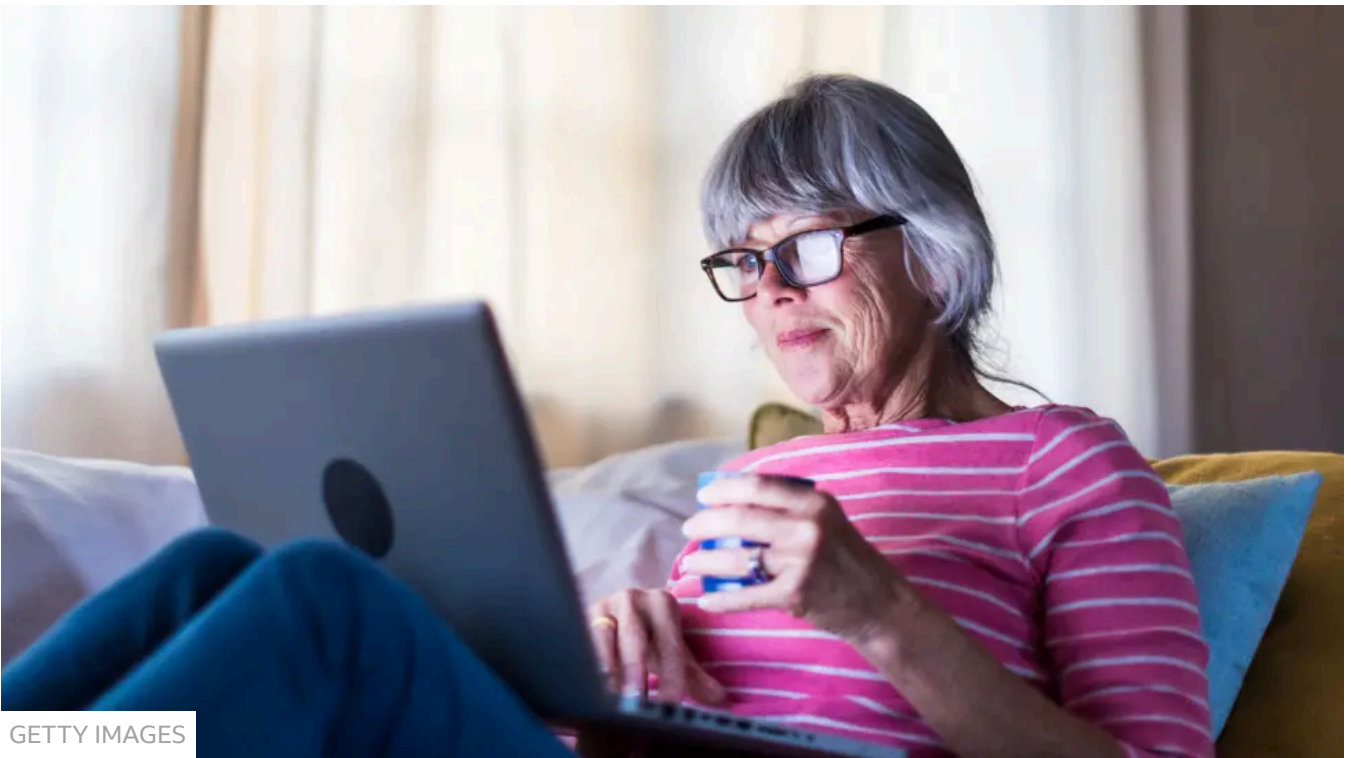
Instead, after discovering the online meetings, she said logging on from the comfort of home had been "wonderful".

Pauline is now the secretary of the "Sassy Lassies", helping to coordinate monthly sessions.

Although she has never met the women she spends her time with in person, she counts many of them as friends, with the group often sending flowers of support and messages of encouragement when life "get's challenging".

"It doesn't matter where in the country we are, we can all just sit down and have a chat," she said.

"It's a lifeline."



GETTY IMAGES

| Across the country, there are now 18 virtual WI groups.

As president of the virtual WI group in West Yorkshire, Jo Nuttal, 53, said it was "challenging stereotypes", adding: "There is not a jam jar in sight".

Instead, their monthly meetings have centred around tartan making, moon meditation and cyber security.

"It is life-learning," she said.

Before joining, Jo had "never been into video-calling" but decided to join the group when her husband became unwell.

"Before he died, I really couldn't get out," she said.

"I was caring for him, he was housebound, I worked full time, so I didn't want to go out and do something social - that felt unkind when someone depends on you.

"[The online meetings] were a really helpful social activity when doing social activities was really difficult."

Across the country, there are now 18 virtual WI groups.

A spokesperson for the National Federation for Women's Institutes said the number "grew in size" in the last year.

"Virtual groups afford women more flexibility and choice of how and when they meet with their fellow members," they said.

"Being "local" isn't as much of a factor."

Jo said she thought the groups were having a positive impact on the population.

"If you think about the ripples of wellbeing, if I'm in a better place and I'm happy, then I'm going to be better for the people I interact with.

"If you're miserable those ripples go out as well.

"This is about real women supporting women in all sorts of ways."



FAMILY HANDOUT

| Sandra started the "Sassy Lassies" Virtual WI group after recognising the demand

One of the driving forces behind the "Sassy Lassies", Sandra, helped to set up the group after recognising the demand for virtual meetings.

"There are members who don't like going out at night," she said.

"There are members who have caring responsibilities.

"There are members who have health issues that may stop them leaving the house."

She said hearing how the group had impacted members was "wonderful".

"Back then it was about combating loneliness - this is a way of reaching far more women," she said.

"It just makes me want to smile."

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