

Pandemic solitude was positive experience for many

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Time spent alone during the pandemic led to positive effects on well-being across all ages, new research has found.

The study of more than 2000 teenagers and adults, published in *Frontiers in Psychology* today, found that most people experienced benefits from solitude during the early days of the global COVID-19 [pandemic](#).

All age groups experienced positive as well as [negative effects](#) of being alone. However, the researchers found that descriptions of solitude included more positive effects than negative. On average, well-being scores when participants were alone were 5 out of 7 across all ages, including adolescents aged 13-16.

Some study participants talked about worsening mood or wellbeing, but most described their experiences of solitude in terms of feeling competent and feeling autonomous. 43% of all respondents mentioned that solitude involved activities and experiences of competence—time spent on skills-building and activities, and that was consistent across all ages. Meanwhile, autonomy—self-connection and reliance on self—was a major feature particularly for adults, who mentioned it twice as often as teenage participants.

Working age adults recorded the most negative experiences with more participants mentioning disrupted well-being (35.6% vs 29.4% in adolescents and 23.7% in [older adults](#)) and negative mood (44% vs 27.8% in adolescents and 24.5% in older adults). Experiences of alienation, or the cost of not interacting with friends, were twice as frequent among adolescents (around one in seven, or 14.8%) as when compared to adults (7%) with older adults mentioning it most infrequently (2.3%).

Dr. Netta Weinstein, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Reading and lead author of the paper said:

"Our paper shows that aspects of solitude, a positive way of describing being alone, is recognised across all ages as providing benefits for our well-being.

"The conventional wisdom is that adolescents on the whole found that the pandemic was a [negative experience](#), but we see in our study how

components of solitude can be positive. Over those first few months of the pandemic here in the UK, we see that working adults were actually the most likely to mention aspects of worsening well-being and mood, but even those are not as commonly mentioned as more positive experiences of solitude.

"We conducted the research in the summer of 2020 which coincided with the end of the first national lockdown in the UK. We know that many people reconnected with hobbies and interests or increasingly appreciating nature on walks and bike rides during that time, and those elements of what we describe as 'self-determined motivation', where we choose to spend time alone for ourselves are seemingly a critical aspect of positive wellbeing.

"Seeing working age adults experience disrupted well-being and negative mood may in fact be related to the pandemic reducing our ability to find peaceful solitude. As we all adjusted to a 'new normal', many working adults found that usual moments of being alone, whether on their commute or during a work break where disrupted. Even for the most ardent of extroverts, these small windows of peace shows the important role of time alone for our mental health. "It also suggests that certain experiences of solitude are learned or valued increasingly with age, having an effect to reduce the impact of negative elements of loneliness and generally boosting well-being. Equally, it suggests that casual inferences about loneliness based on age and stage miss the reality of our nuanced lived experiences."

The results come from a series of in-depth interviews where participants from the UK answered open questions about their experiences of solitude. The team of researchers coded the answers to find shared experiences and measured [quantitative data](#) about two aspects of wellbeing associated with solitude, self-determined motivation (the choice to spend time alone) and peaceful mood.

The researchers note that the findings were taken from one phase of the COVID-19 pandemic during the summer of 2020, and recommend that follow up data looks at experiences of solitude during challenging periods such as this one, and also more commonplace periods where daily [solitude](#) may look and feel different.

More information: Netta Weinstein et al, What Time Alone Offers: Narratives of Solitude From Adolescence to Older Adulthood, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.714518](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.714518)

Provided by University of Reading

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