

The importance of solitude: Why time on your own can sometimes be good for you

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Spending time alone can induce fear in a lot of people, which is understandable. At the same time, the difference between moments of solitude and loneliness is often misunderstood.

As a psychologist, I study solitude—the time we spend alone, not

interacting with other people. I started this research more than ten years ago and, up to that point, [findings on young people's time alone](#) had suggested they often experience low moods when alone.

On [social media](#), television or in the music we listen to, we typically picture happiness as excitement, enthusiasm and energization. From that perspective, solitude is often mistaken for loneliness.

In psychology, researchers define [loneliness as a distressed feeling](#) that we experience when we don't have, or are unable to get, the kind of social connections or relationships we hope for. [Solitude is different](#).

While people's definitions of solitude might vary, what is interesting is that for many, being solitary [doesn't necessarily mean there's no one else around](#). Instead, many people can, and do, find solitude in [public spaces](#), whether this be sitting with a cup of tea in a busy café or reading a book in a park. And my research suggests that taking some time for yourself could have a positive impact on your daily mood.

Many of us have had days when there are troubles at work, when things don't go as expected, or when we take on too much and feel overwhelmed. [What I've found is](#) that learning to take a little time for yourself, a moment of solitude, could help you deal with these feelings.

What can we gain from solitude?

In a [series of experiments](#), I brought [undergraduate students](#) into a room to sit quietly with themselves. In some studies, I took away the students' backpacks and devices and asked them to sit with their thoughts; at other times, the students stayed in the room with books or their phones.

After just 15 minutes of being alone, I found that any strong emotions the participants might have been feeling, such as anxiety or excitement,

dropped. I concluded that solitude has the capacity to bring down people's arousal levels, meaning it can be useful in situations where we feel frustrated, agitated or angry.

Many people might assume that only introverts would enjoy solitude. But while it is true that [introverts might prefer to be alone](#), they are [not the only people](#) who can reap the benefits from solitude.

In a survey of more than 18,000 adults around the world, more than half voted for solitude as [one of the key activities they engage in for rest](#). So, if you are an extrovert, don't let this stop you from taking time for solitude to calm down.

Sitting with your thoughts can be difficult

The challenging part about spending time alone is that it can be boring and lonely sometimes.

Many people find that sitting with their thoughts can be difficult, and prefer having something to do. Indeed, forcing yourself to sit and do nothing can lead to you [finding time alone less enjoyable](#). So you might prefer to have some sort of activity during your moment of solitude.

In [my study](#), I gave participants the choice to do nothing or spend their time sorting hundreds and hundreds of golf pencils into boxes. After being asked to be alone for ten minutes, most participants chose to sort the pencils. This is the sort of activity I thought most people would find boring. However, the choice to do the boring task stems from the desire to keep busy when other people are not around to occupy our mental space.

So, if you find yourself scrolling on your device every time you have a few moments of solitude, this is quite common. Don't be hard on

yourself. Many people scroll to [cope with stress and boredom](#). Some people also prefer spending their time alone doing daily chores, such as going grocery shopping or doing laundry. This is valid solitary time.

Engaging in fun activities alone

It is interesting, however, that many people [shy away from engaging in fun activities alone](#), like going to the cinema or dining at a restaurant. This might be because we tend to think of them as activities we do with friends and close ones, so doing them alone can make us [feel judged and self-conscious](#). Traveling alone is another activity that can be intimidating, [particularly for women](#).

But a key benefit of going solo is the opportunity to find calm, and having the freedom to choose what to do and how to do it.

In my time studying solitude, I have challenged myself to take on some of these fun activities in my moments of solitude, and I have found the experience rather liberating. Other women have similar experiences, especially when traveling, which has left them [feeling empowered and freed](#).

To overcome our fear of solitude, we need to recognize its benefits and [see it as a positive choice](#)—not something that happens to us. While taking a solo trip might be a bit much for you right now, taking time out of your busy schedule for small doses of [solitude](#) might well be just what you need.

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