

Do You Know the Benefits of Practicing Solitude?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Solitude is often described as a bad thing because it's looked at in the context of other psychological experiences like isolation, social rejection or loneliness
- › Solitude is different from loneliness and is useful for restoring calm, reducing stress and enhancing relaxation
- › Solitude is associated with positive psychological adjustment, stress management and life satisfaction, and it may boost relationship quality and stimulate creativity
- › Solitude is not so much a state of being alone as it is an experience in which the dominant relationship is with the self
- › You can engage in solitude while in the presence of others, such as while reading a book or sipping a cup of coffee in a café

Solitude — the state of being alone — is often described as a bad thing. But that's because it's often discussed in the context of other psychological experiences like isolation, social rejection or loneliness.¹

Solitude is different from loneliness, however. When researchers sought to understand solitude as a “psychological experience of being alone, without communications, stimuli, activities or devices,” they found it led to beneficial effects on health.

Solitude Can Increase Relaxation and Reduce Stress

Thuy-vy Nguyen, assistant professor in the department of psychology at Durham University in England, has been studying solitude for a decade. Early research from 1978 suggested being alone was often perceived as a negative experience,² but Nguyen and colleagues have found otherwise.

“In psychology,” she wrote in *The Conversation*, “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 ... my research suggests that taking some time for yourself could have a positive impact on your daily mood.”³

In a series of experiments on undergraduate students,⁴ Nguyen found that spending just 15 minutes alone had a “deactivation effect,” such that any strong emotions were reduced. This was true whether the emotion was positive, such as excitement, or negative, such as anxiety.

“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,” she said.⁵ The study suggested it’s possible to use solitude as a form of self-regulation, to become “quiet after excitement, calm after an angry episode, or centered and peaceful when desired.”⁶ It could also be useful when you need to relax in order to fall asleep.

Chosen Solitude Is Most Beneficial

In a survey of 18,000 people from 34 countries, spending time alone was the third most common “restful” activity described, after reading and being in the natural environment.⁷ The key to this alone time feeling restful and restorative instead of lonely and sad may be making it a choice.

“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,” Nguyen said.⁸ When it occurs due to your own choosing, solitude tends to be experienced positively, as opposed to when it is undesired.

Indeed, solitude is associated with positive psychological adjustment, stress management and life satisfaction, and it may boost relationship quality and stimulate creativity.⁹ The way you appraise your alone time, however, may dictate whether you experience its related benefits – or downsides.

“If we appraise time alone as positive, we may experience solitude and its associated benefits. By contrast, if we appraise our time alone as negative, then we may fall victim to the pains of loneliness,” researchers from Harvard University explained.¹⁰

Cognitive reappraisal, or reinterpreting the meaning of a situation, may help you change the way you see being alone into a more positive experience. In the Harvard University study, all participants experienced declines in positive and negative mood when sitting alone, but those who read about the benefits of solitude had a smaller decline in positive mood.

“[R]eappraising time alone as solitude may boost resilience to the decrements in positive mood associated with time alone,” they explained.¹¹

Active Solitude Takes Many Forms

While solitude may involve sitting alone in quiet meditation or soaking up the stillness of an unpopulated forest preserve, it can also be gained during active pursuits. “Some solitary activities – such as writing, contemplating, relaxing and enjoying nature – can promote positive feelings, life satisfaction and personal growth,” according to a study in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.¹² People differ in how they like to spend their moments of solitude, as well.

In Nguyen’s studies, however, most preferred to keep busy rather than sitting alone with their thoughts – even when keeping busy meant a monotonous task of sorting golf pencils into boxes. “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,” she explained.¹³

For others, moments of solitude are gained during necessary activities like grocery shopping or doing laundry. “This is valid solitary time,” Nguyen says.¹⁴ Solo travel is another option, which provides the freedom to make your own choices about your activities and interests. Dining out alone or going to see a movie also count.

You Don't Have To Be Solitary to Experience Solitude

Toward that end, you don't have to be alone to experience the calm stillness that solitude offers. According to Nguyen:¹⁵

“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 cafe or reading a book in a park.”

In a separate study, Nguyen and colleagues interviewed people between the ages of 19 and 80 from a variety of backgrounds in order to determine definitions of solitude in everyday life. Solitude, they discovered, is not so much a state of being alone as it is an experience in which the dominant relationship is with the self:¹⁶

“If not physically alone, people in solitude are mentally distanced from others and away from active technology-mediated interactions. Complete solitude involves both physical separation and inner focus, but solitude is best defined through a taxonomy that recognizes physical separation and internal focus as independent, sufficient characteristics. An internal focus benefits from (but is not defined by) balancing solitude with social time, quiet, and choice.”

Nguyen describes “private solitude” as being physically apart from other people, while “public solitude” occurs in the presence of others, but not interacting with them actively. “Consider as an example ‘dinner for one’ at a restaurant. Others are present, yet one is arguably in solitude – in their own space and not responding to others’ continual social cues and expectations.”¹⁷

Solitude Is Not Social Isolation

Whereas solitude can provide a much-needed respite from the stress of work and daily life, loneliness exacts a significant toll on your health, one that increases your risk of premature death.¹⁸ In a survey of more than 20,000 U.S. adults, 46% said they sometimes or always feel alone.¹⁹

Facundo Manes, a neurologist, neuroscientist and founder of the Neurological Cognitive Institute in Argentina, likens feelings of loneliness to "a biological alarm bell that reminds us that we are social beings,"²⁰ and when this alarm goes off, disease processes are set into motion.

Your brain health may also suffer as a result of feeling lonely. Researchers from Florida State University in Tallahassee found loneliness was associated with a 40% increased risk of dementia over the 10-year study period,²¹ and the link was independent of other risk factors including gender, education, race, ethnicity and even social isolation. The latter is an important distinction, as social isolation is an objective measure that refers to the number of contacts a person has socially.

A person can have a large quantity of social contacts yet still feel lonely, or have a low number of social contacts and feel fulfilled, so social isolation is not always the best measure of how a person is feeling internally. Indeed, researchers have long described loneliness as a subjective experience,²² similar to solitude in that your perception of it may alter the way it affects you physically and mentally.

How to Embrace Solitude

It's possible to turn negative feelings of loneliness into the positive experience of solitude. A study involving 14 adults, in fact, revealed "solitude skills" that can be used to embrace solitude as a positive experience. This includes:²³

Enjoy solitary activities

Emotion regulation

Introspection

Making time to be alone

Using alone time mindfully

Validating your need for solitude

Heed signals to enter solitude

Know when to exit solitude

The first set of skills – enjoying solitary activities, emotion regulation and introspection – involve connecting with yourself. In solitude, your focus should be on self-reflection and allowing your emotions to surface. You should engage in solitary activities you enjoy, whether that be going for a solo jog or getting lost in a good book.

The next skillset involves protecting your time by finding the time to be alone, using it mindfully and not feeling guilty about it. Society places a negative view on solitary people, or enjoying solitude, as though it's antisocial or unhealthy. So, part of embracing solitude is recognizing the human need for it and carving out time in your day to engage in it.

Finally, other solitude skills involve finding a balance, including knowing when it's time to seek out solitude. If you're feeling overwhelmed, burned out or overstimulated, taking a solitary time-out can help reset your emotions and give your body and mind time to recover. Pay attention to those feelings and enter solitude when you need it, even if it's just for a few minutes.

Knowing when to exit solitude is equally important. "The two most common cues are boredom and loneliness, signaling that you are actually understimulated rather than overstimulated, and that the solitude you craved earlier has likely served its purpose," psychologist Virginia Thomas, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Middlebury College, explained.²⁴

If you feel solitude is lacking in your life, remember that it doesn't have to be all or nothing – or involve complete isolation. Sipping a cup of tea on your front porch while listening to birds chirp qualifies, as does chipping away on a woodworking project in your garage.

The key is finding the moments of solitude that matter to you and engaging in them until you feel rested and restored – but not lonely. “While taking a solo trip might be a bit much for you right now,” Nguyen says, “taking time out of your busy schedule for small doses of solitude might well be just what you need.”²⁵

Sources and References

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- ⁶ [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin October 26, 2017, General Discussion](#)
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- ²² [Journal of Social and Personal Relationships February 1989, second paragraph](#)
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- ²⁴ [Psychology Today February 3, 2022](#)