

Life²

How to be alone (but not lonely)



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Introduction

Is it a good thing or a bad thing to be alone? Opinion seems to be divided.

Some experts argue that loneliness is a modern social problem comparable with smoking in its negative effects on our health, whilst others argue that solitude is good for us and we should seek more of it in our lives, especially in the fast-paced, people-packed modern world.

Things are clearly a bit more complicated than this, and this booklet explores what it means to be alone in modern society, including the problems of loneliness, the useful possibilities of solitude and the influence modern society has on both these things. Ultimately, it provides some practical ideas on how to both reduce our loneliness and explore the benefits of solitude (if we want to).

There seems to be a significant difference between solitude and loneliness - and perhaps the two states can be distinguished as follows: solitude is a voluntary state, brought about by a choice to be alone, whereas loneliness is a negative state we haven't chosen to be in, where we feel alone and isolated. And it's often 'feel alone' rather than 'are alone' as loneliness is more complex than just actually being alone. For many people, loneliness could simply be a feeling of being alone and isolated in the world - even if they have a rich social life and many friends.

This distinction between 'feeling alone' and 'being alone' will be important towards the end of the booklet when we start looking at some of the ways we can overcome loneliness - as many people not only need to deal with the practical situation of being alone, but also the (perhaps more troublesome) psychological side of feeling alone - no matter how much we surround ourselves with people.

We're attempting to cover a lot of ground in this booklet, as we want to discuss these two big issues together because we feel they are linked - but this may mean that we have to sacrifice some detail and just skim the surface of particular issues in order to do this. There is a list of 'further reading' at the end of the booklet to give you options to continue looking at these important topics.



Part 1

Loneliness – the social disease

Loneliness – the social disease

There are evolutionary reasons why we developed the ability to feel the pain of social isolation. It's been argued that loneliness developed as a stimulus to get humans to pay more attention to their social connections, and to reach out toward others, to renew frayed or broken bonds. It was a response that evolved to try to prevent the individual becoming socially isolated.

Research has shown that we have both mental and physical reactions to feelings of loneliness. It therefore has the potential to become a chronic, harmful condition if left unchecked, and in recent years the evidence has built as to just how potentially harmful it can be.

For example, a recent study² by the University of California suggests that adults who described themselves as lonely or isolated had a 45 percent greater risk of dying earlier than older adults who felt more connected to others. They were also more likely to experience faster 'functional decline' in the ability to do basic tasks like housework.

Evidence like this has recently led some experts to suggest that "Social isolation has an impact on health comparable to the effect of high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity or smoking"³.

According to the mental health charity Mind, “Loneliness and social isolation can have a significant impact on your mental health. Studies have shown that people who are socially isolated experience more stress, have lower self-esteem and are more likely to have sleep problems than people who have strong social support. Being lonely can also contribute to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.”⁴

In their 2010 report ‘The Lonely Society?’ the Mental Health Foundation notes “Research shows that ‘loneliness becomes an issue of serious concern only when it settles in long enough to create a persistent, self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations and behaviours’. In other words, it is long-term, chronic loneliness that wears us down rather than loneliness that is ‘situational’ or passing.”⁵

There is no doubt then that we need to address it - both as a society and in our own lives if we are experiencing it. But what is loneliness? It’s not necessarily the fact that you are alone at a given point in time, but more the feeling of being isolated. It’s about our sense of connection with other people and the quality of this connection - rather than the number of people and their presence at a particular moment.

What makes people lonely?

Loneliness can affect people in many different ways and can be caused by a range of things. We can split these into two groups - situations which we are socially isolated and pre-existing feelings of loneliness.

- Your situation - there may be aspects of your life and situation that make you isolated or at risk of feeling lonely - for example, if you:
 - have recently lost someone close to you or split up from a partner
 - are less mobile or well and are unable to leave the house on your own
 - have moved away from existing social networks - including moving to a new area, getting a new job or retiring
 - have few opportunities for social activities - perhaps due to lack of money or illness
 - have been through bad relationships or abuse - which may have made it hard for you to build close relationships with others.
- Your feelings - some people feel a strong, ongoing sense of loneliness, no matter how many people they surround themselves with and how busy they are.

These feelings may arise for a range of reasons, including a lack of self confidence, feelings of low self-worth, a history of abuse, trauma or bad

relationships or simply having been exposed to prolonged periods of isolation or loneliness in the past.

These internal feelings can lead to a number of different consequences - from the desire to shut yourself off from other people and a fear of engaging socially, to the opposite - an attempt to keep as busy and socially involved as possible - perhaps even resorting to more extreme forms of stimulation such as drugs.

Loneliness and the modern world

In the modern world, we are surrounded by more people than ever before, are better connected via social media than ever before and many of us have greater international mobility than ever before, so it seems counter-intuitive to suggest that we are generally now more isolated than we ever have been. But the latest evidence seems to suggest that we are.

For example, in October 2014, The Guardian newspaper reported that “the Office for National Statistics found Britain to be the loneliness capital of Europe. We’re less likely to have strong friendships or know our neighbours than residents anywhere else in the EU.”⁶

It also appears that loneliness is affecting people of different ages and walks of life. For example, it is now reasonably well known that the elderly are becoming increasingly vulnerable to loneliness and isolation.

As George Monbiot notes “A study by Independent Age shows that severe loneliness in England blights the lives of 700,000 men and 1.1m women over 50, and is rising with astonishing speed.”⁷

A very sad figure is quoted by the Campaign Against Loneliness - “Two fifths all older people (about 3.9 million) say the television is their main company (Age UK, 2014).”⁸

But, as The Guardian reports, it’s not just older people who are being increasingly affected by loneliness. “In 2010 the Mental Health Foundation found loneliness to be a greater concern among young people than the elderly. The 18 to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely often, to worry about feeling alone and to feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s.”⁹

So, it seems that loneliness is a problem spreading across the modern westernised world. But why is this happening now? Below are some possible contributing causes.

The atomisation of society

The typical family unit in the UK changed radically in the twentieth century, moving from the extended family living together or close to each other, through the nuclear family (“2.4 children and a dog”), to the growing modern trend for living on one’s own. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in 2006 around 14% of the population in England lived alone – more than

double the proportion (6.5%) that did so in 1971.¹⁰

As well as this change, ease of travel, improved communications and changes in work culture (amongst other things) have led many families to become scattered, not just around one country, but across the world. Such families may only get together once a year, sometimes even less.

These changes to the family unit have left certain groups of people in greater risk of isolation, including the elderly, who in other periods may have remained part of the family unit with all the support and social interaction this entails, but who are now often cut adrift from these units and left to their own devices or, in older age, the care of institutions.

Changes in the idea of community

Our idea of community has changed over recent decades. The idea of community based on connection to one's locality and neighbours seems to have faded, along with our opportunities to meet people in our neighbourhoods through the cutting back of public and local services such as post offices and public transport. Our relationship with our communities has also changed, as rather than being immersed in them on a day to day basis as before, many people now only have a transient relationship with their local area and community - commuting in and out at the start and end of each day.

It could be argued that other types of community have

grown (such as those relating to a sense of connection with political causes) whilst local communities have been on the wane, but it is clear that there has been a decline in our overall sense of community. For example a survey by the University of Sheffield for the BBC in 2008 “concluded that a sense of community had weakened in almost every area of the UK over the past 30 years.”¹¹

The influence of turbo capitalism and individualism

The influence of the defining philosophy of our time can be seen to contribute to a greater sense of loneliness and isolation in a number of ways - here are just a few examples:

- We are spending more time at work - as suggested by the Mental Health Foundation, “socialising and investing time in social ties are generally seen as less important than ‘productive’ activities like work”¹² so we are investing more time in these ‘economically productive’ activities to the detriment of our social lives and sense of connection.
- We’ve become more materialistic - we’ve become fixated on consumerism and the acquisition of material goods, following the line fed to us by advertisers, companies and governments that increased material wealth and consumption will make us happier, when the evidence shows that, beyond a certain, surprisingly low, point - around \$15,000 a head GDP in 2003 prices¹³, it doesn’t.

Our pursuit of these materialistic goals may have led us to neglect the things that actually do add something to our lives - including good relationships, friendships and social connection.

- We've become more competitive and individualistic - following from the previous point, our sense of wanting to connect with people has been replaced by a desire to compare ourselves with them, to be jealous of them and to compete with them for better, bigger, faster or more things.

To quote George Monbiot - "The war of every man against every man – competition and individualism in other words – is the religion of our time, justified by a mythology of lone rangers, sole traders, self-starters, self-made men and women, going it alone. For the most social of creatures, who cannot prosper without love, there is now no such thing as society, only heroic individualism. What counts is to win. The rest is collateral damage."¹⁴

The rise of technology and social media

The advent of the internet and social media has delivered many more opportunities for greater connection and interaction with a wider range of people, and it's clear that younger people are using these tools to interact with each other in a way that is different from what we've known in the past. It does seem that new technology can help to reduce social isolation.

One concern however may be that this form of

communication could change or reduce our ability to communicate and relate to people in other ways - such as face-to-face. It also lacks the physical benefits that face-to-face connection can bring us. “Research shows that cognitive function improves if a relationship is physical, as well as intellectual, mainly because of the chemical process taking place during face-to-face encounters with others.” So, there seems to be no substitute for good old fashioned person-to-person contact.

For these reasons, and more, the commentator George Monbiot has argued that we are living in ‘The Age of Loneliness’.¹⁵



Part 2

The joy of solitude

The joy of solitude

“ I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude.
*Henry David Thoreau*¹⁶ ”

Solitude is a state into which all of us are born and end our lives, and in which many of us spend a significant proportion of our lives in between. So even if you're not the sort of person who is naturally inclined to enjoy spending time on their own, most of us would benefit from being able to adapt to the state of solitude and make the most of it when we are faced with it.

There are however many people who actively seek solitude in their lives - short, regular periods for some, entire lifetimes for others - and find great fulfilment, pleasure, creativity and solace in spending time alone.

We live however in a hyper-social age in which solitude is regarded as a state to be avoided, and where anyone who happens to find themselves in it should be pitied, unless they actively sought it out, in which case they are 'recluses' or 'loners' - people who should be feared and suspected.

Before we look at how the modern world militates against solitude, let us explore the benefits of solitude, including first a personal account of the importance of solitude from someone who needs it.

The desire for solitude

To give a personal perspective, I've always enjoyed spending time on my own, but it's only recently as I've entered middle age that I've realised how much I genuinely need solitude on a regular basis. The realisation has emerged through a number of observations coming together, such as my feeling of having an 'off switch', where, after spending a few hours of time with people I feel the need to switch off and return to solitude and my own thoughts. Or my almost physical sense of yearning to escape from human company after a certain time, or the wonderful sense of ease, balance and contentment I feel when in my own company.

I find myself yearning for solitude - even though I have a young family who I love very much. It can be a hard thing for people close to me to understand this desire for solitude as it can make them feel criticised and rejected. But, of course, it's not about anything they are doing wrong and it's certainly not a personal slight on any of my family and friends - it's simply a need and a character trait within me. And it's not something I'm prepared to feel guilty about as I think it's a perfectly reasonable thing to need.

I've been able to integrate this need for solitude into my family and social lives, although it's a constant balancing act and I still don't always get it right.

This isn't simply a selfish desire for a bit of peace (which, even in itself would not be unreasonable for anyone to have) - it is about fulfilling an essential part of one's character. Everyone's different - and some people just need it like food and water. Here's an analogy, and if you've ever been in either of these situations you'll understand it - remember the intense feeling of pain when you are feeling terribly lonely? Well, the reverse can bring a similar level of suffering to some people - when you are feeling terribly surrounded and imposed on by other people - absorbing views and opinions you have no desire to let in to your head, feeling exhausted maintaining a mask of interest and engagement in conversation with people when you'd rather pull back into your own solitary space with just your own thoughts and stillness for company.

The benefits and joys of solitude

As we've just seen, some people just seem 'wired' to need regular periods of solitude in order to function and think clearly. But solitude potentially has a number of benefits for everyone - even people who are hyper-social. These benefits include:

- It gives you a chance to pause and get some perspective and space in your life and dealings with others.

- It removes you from social pressure and can ease stress.
- It connects you with yourself again - a vital thing, as it reminds you that you are not just the product of other people's perceptions of you - something it's easy to feel when you're 'out in the world' with other people. Instead it enables you to feel an ally to yourself and feel content with your own identity rather than someone struggling against yourself.
- It helps mindfulness - and promotes the important benefits that this brings.
- It gives opportunities for productive mental activities such as creativity, problem-solving and contemplation.

Solitude and the modern world

In the earlier section, it may have been difficult initially to see how the extra-busy, highly populated modern world has helped to foster social isolation, but we have no such problems in seeing how it also makes it difficult to gain useful solitude.

We live in a world in which there is an ever-increasing population, and more and more people are packing into cities and urban areas. We now have constant, ongoing access to media (and, in consequence, other peoples' voices) in our lives as a result of technology, social media, smartphones, advertising and other developments. The end result of this is a never-ending

stream of communication coming at each of us in our lives, and an expectation that we need to stay in touch with this communication (however trivial or pointless most of it may be) in order to 'keep up' with the world - with the inference being that we'll be less successful - and presumably, more isolated and lonely - if we don't.

So, it is not only practical things like the number of people and omnipresence of communications from people that can make it harder for us to find solitude in the modern world - it is also the fact that idea of unplugging from this barrage of communications is frowned upon in mass society. In fact, there seems to be an overriding attitude to solitude that sees it as a negative, suspicious and pitiful state to be in. It is incredibly unfashionable to be alone, and the language of our society is biased against it - for example, how many times have you seen a killer described in the newspapers as a 'loner' - as if to say that this provides the explanation for their mental instability and terrible misdeeds.

For example, since the epoch-changing moon landings in 1969 the extrovert Buzz Aldrin has been regularly happy to appear in public and on TV to talk about them, but the more introverted (read 'loner') Neil Armstrong has been far more reluctant to do so, having seen himself as an engineer rather than an astronaut or celebrity, and has only given occasional interviews. This had led to him being branded a 'recluse' by some commentators, as if he were somehow a damaged

person or not fulfilling his duty - when his preference is, quite reasonably, to not be in the spotlight.

So, these factors (and many others) combined suggest that the modern world makes it harder than ever before to find solitude, and also that we live in a world in which we could each benefit from solitude more than ever before.

So, it is a curious contradiction, but the modern world seems to promote the worst of both worlds - it promotes loneliness in various ways and makes it harder to get useful solitude.

Final point

Clearly, some people need solitude more than others, but it seems reasonable to suggest that many people could benefit from it regularly in their lives, and that certain aspects of our modern culture could be preventing many people from both realising that they have a real need for it and actually pursuing it because it's seen to be a bad thing.



Part 3

How to be alone, and not lonely



How to be alone, and not lonely

From the two sections so far, it seems that being alone can be a positive or a negative thing. There is such a thing as useful solitude (the type that we find nourishing and full of creative possibilities) and there's non-useful solitude (including the type that gets negative and turns into loneliness).

And it's clear that the presence of people around you at a given time (whether a partner or large groups of people) isn't the key factor here. It's how connected we feel generally that matters. So, to combat loneliness we need to establish a sense of connection and 'social well being' on an ongoing basis. And this could give us the confidence we need to enjoy being alone when it happens - and to even seek it out regularly for the benefits it brings us.

This leads us to the subject of this final section - the practical steps we can take to reduce feelings of loneliness, and also to explore the benefits of solitude (if we want to).

Overall, it's about striking the right balance between meeting your need for interaction as a social creature and exploring the level and type of solitude that could be nourishing for you as an individual.

How to overcome loneliness

Given the increasing evidence of the severe effects of loneliness on our physical and mental health it is clear we should be doing more about it as a society, and in our own lives to fight against it - treating the fight against loneliness as an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

As we've already noted, a sense of loneliness can be linked to your situation and feelings - the former might need you to increase your level of social contact and the latter might need you to develop ways to deal with these feelings. The recommendations below can't be neatly split into these two areas, as each suggestion could bring some benefits for each area. We hope though that they will be useful.

If you're concerned, see a doctor

Before we get into any recommendations, if you are concerned that your feelings of loneliness are developing into a mental health problem, you may find it helpful to talk to your GP. Sometimes feeling lonely can feel so overwhelming that you have suicidal thoughts. If this happens, remember that you can pick up the phone at any time of night or day and talk to the Samaritans.

Reach out to others

Some people's feelings of loneliness stem from a sense of disconnection with other people and the world. If you feel like this, you can take some simple steps to connect with the world around you. For example, start

by getting in touch with the people you already know, including family and friends, and just enjoy the sense of connection - even if it is just through an email or phone call.

Make the most of opportunities to connect

Every day, try to make the most of any opportunities to connect with people - however minor these might seem - for example, saying hello to people while you're walking your dog, or striking up a conversation with a shop keeper.

Also, when you are out in social situations, make an effort to participate. As mental health charity Mind suggests "If you are with other people or in a group situation, it can be easy to stay quiet or hide behind your phone. However, this can make you feel lonelier in the long run. Although it may feel difficult, joining in the conversation, even a bit, can often help you feel less isolated¹⁷."

Meet new people

One effective means of reducing isolation is to find people with similar interests or ideas to connect with and build friendships with. There are a wide range of ways to achieve this, including through workplaces, sports clubs, social groups, parent groups, community groups and volunteering. The internet can be a very good source of information on local groups with similar interests, and can also be an effective way in its own right to get in touch with people and begin friendships with people. Make sure you try to build face-to-face

contact and friendships too though - for the reasons mentioned earlier.

Seek quality, not quantity of interactions

Once you've started to build new social connections, try to seek a better quality of relationships rather than trying to amass as many 'friends' as possible, as this will provide you (and them) with the most nourishing and rewarding interactions. When you are fortunate enough to develop these relationships, give time and effort to nurturing them - really listening, giving time and sharing your thoughts with them.

Try to tackle your feelings

If you've been isolated or experienced feelings of loneliness for a long time, you may have a wide range of ways in which you think negatively about yourself or feel anxiety about connecting with others. Here are a few initial thoughts on how to start addressing some of these:

- Calm yourself down - if you feel anxiety in social situations, try practicing some relaxation techniques - such as mindfulness and breathing control - to have at your disposal before social situations.
- Get real - if you are anxious before or during a social situation, try to see the reality of the situation - ask yourself what's the worst that could happen if you get involved and participate. Also realise that most other people will have their own social issues too and will not be focussing on yours!

- Be brave and persevere - you may find social situations hard work and possibly stressful initially, but ‘if you can see them through then the rewards, in the form of positive feelings, new outlooks and habits and lasting life changes, are so great it is well worth it.
- Don’t be afraid to be yourself - remember all the good things about yourself and don’t feel obliged to mould yourself to fit in with others in social situations. Be polite, pleasant but be yourself - as it’s exhausting trying to be anyone else! See the Life Squared leaflet ‘How to be yourself’ for more ideas.

Seek additional help

You may find that, despite trying to do so, you’re not able to get the level of social contact that you want, or that your feelings of loneliness are too much for you to resolve them on your own. If this is the case, you may find counselling or psychotherapy useful to help you resolve these feelings. For example, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) looks at how you can change any negative patterns of thinking or behaviour that may be causing you difficulties. Mind suggests that CBT “has been found to be particularly effective for anxiety-based conditions, including agoraphobia and social phobia.¹⁸” Contact your GP or other healthcare provider if you’d like to try a talking treatment like this, and they can give you information and refer you to a local service.

Start now to protect yourself from loneliness in future

“Getting older doesn’t have to mean getting lonelier,” says Ruth Sutherland, the chief executive of Relate, in a new report. “But much of this rests on laying the foundations to good-quality relationships earlier in life.¹⁹”

How to find and enjoy solitude

As we’ve already noted, there is a lot of solitude in the world - but the trick is to learn how to carve out opportunities for positive, nourishing solitude.

We suggest that many people could benefit from learning to deal with, and more importantly, embrace solitude, yet the prevailing attitude in society is so ‘anti-solitude’ that many people may not have had the chance to honestly evaluate whether it could be useful for them. So, even if you’re someone who’s built a ‘hyper social’ modern life with all the expectations and demands this brings, evaluate it honestly for yourself, could a bit of solitude release yourself from some shackles? Could you get more from some solitude than you originally thought? If so, think about how you can try it out and build it more into your life.

We may need to train ourselves to do this if it doesn’t come naturally, so here are some ideas on how to bring it into your life more.

Learn how to enjoy time alone

This will benefit you enormously if you've felt lonely but haven't been able to build the level of connection with others you wanted as quickly as you'd hoped for. We all face time on our own at points in our lives and it helps to be able to deal with it - and, better still, embrace it. But, even if you're not isolated or lonely, and not naturally inclined to seek solitude it can be useful to try it out and see if it brings any benefits. Give it some time before you dismiss it.

There are many ways in which you can ease yourself into being alone - but constructive, engaging activities (like cooking, reading, writing, making etc) are likely to be more beneficial than passive activities (such as watching TV) as the former give you a sense of personal achievement and give you a more positive view of yourself. Try to reflect on the pleasure these activities give you rather than the fact that you're alone - and you may then feel that being alone is a more positive thing.

Book in time for it

Modern life can be incredibly busy, particularly if you have a family, work and other people who depend on you. It therefore makes sense to book in some regular time in which you can disconnect yourself from external contact and simply enjoy the benefits of solitude.

It is of course up to you how often and for how long you do this, but if you've not done it before or are trying it out, you may want to try giving yourself a few minutes

each day (perhaps 20 minutes at a set time each day) of proper, focussed time to yourself (for example, to reflect or meditate), plus another slot of a longer period (say, 2 or 3 hours) each week. After you've tried this, adjust the regularity and time up or down depending on what you need. But if you do feel you get benefits from regular solitude, make sure you find time for it.

Disconnect yourself

When you do have the opportunity for solitude, make sure you make good use of it by temporarily disconnecting yourself (if possible - and for most of us it normally is!) from other people and distractions. This includes switching off your mobile phone, turning off your computer or TV - and just giving yourself some real space. Whatever you use your solitude time for - really savour it, as it can be profound if used well.

Get outside

This is by no means essential, but one very effective way to find nourishing solitude can be to get outside into nature. Being outside can give us new views, perspectives and ideas, and fresh air can make our solitude invigorating. There are many ways of enjoying the solitude of the outdoors, including walking, running, or simply sitting down in quiet contemplation.

Ultimately it's your choice of how you want to live

We've given some ideas above on how to seek solitude, and we suggest giving it a try. Ultimately though the question of whether you want more solitude or time to yourself is a highly subjective one and depends on your needs as an individual. The best advice is to give it some real thought and be honest with yourself - there's no right or wrong amount of solitude to have, if it's a genuine preference of yours.

Conclusions

In this guide we have aimed to provide ideas on how to find a balance between two extremes - the need to build a sense of social and personal connection in our lives (to avoid the harmful condition of loneliness), whilst building an appreciation of the benefits we can gain from solitude.

The two simple rules seem to be:

- If you feel lonely - take it as a warning sign and do something about it.
- When you're in a suitable position to do so, try out the benefits of regular, nourishing solitude, and if you find it useful, make time for it in your life.

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'Walden' by Henry David Thoreau, Penguin Classics, London 1986

General

'How to be alone' video by Andrea Dorfman - became a viral hit with over 5 million views - perhaps because its message that 'being alone is OK' resonated with a lot of people - www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7X7sZzSXYs

www.salon.com/2012/08/04/how_to_be_alone_2

How to be alone (but not lonely)

Loneliness has been described as a modern problem that can affect our health as badly as smoking or obesity. Yet, many people yearn for solitude and space in our busy, people-filled society.

This booklet explores what it means to be alone in modern society, including the serious effects of loneliness, the useful possibilities of solitude and the influence modern society has on both these things. Ultimately, it provides some practical ideas on how to both reduce our loneliness and explore the benefits of solitude (if we want to).

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