

Read and annotate the following article “Why You Should Find Time to Be Alone with Yourself: Don’t Confuse Loneliness with Time by Yourself” by Micaela Marini Higgs published in The New York Times in 2019.

Being lonely hurts — it can even negatively impact your health. However, the mere act of being alone with oneself does not have to be bad, and experts say it can even benefit your social relationships, improve your creativity and confidence, and help you regulate your emotions so that you can better deal with adverse situations.

“It’s not that solitude is always good, but it can be good” if you’re open to rejecting the idea — common in the west — that time by yourself is always a negative experience you’re being forced into, according to Thuy-vy Nguyen, an assistant professor in the department of psychology at Durham University, who studies solitude.

“We have some evidence to show that valuing solitude doesn’t really hurt your social life, in fact, it might add to it,” she said, pointing out that because solitude helps us regulate our emotions, it can have a calming effect that prepares us to better engage with others.

Choosing to spend time doing things by yourself can have mental, emotional and social benefits, but the key to reaping those positive rewards comes from *choosing* to spend time alone. In a culture where we often confuse being alone for loneliness, the ability to appreciate time by ourselves prevents us from processing the experience as a negative thing. In fact, getting better at identifying moments when we need solitude to recharge and reflect can help us better handle negative emotions and experiences, like stress and burnout, said Emily Roberts, a psychotherapist.

The added bonus? Getting started is easy — all you need is yourself.

Why it’s hard to spend time alone

“Historically, solitude has had a pretty bad rap” because it is sometimes used as a form of punishment, said Robert Coplan, a developmental psychologist and professor of psychology at Carleton University.

The problem is that we forget solitude can also be a choice — and it does not have to be full time. Because there is so much research demonstrating that humans are social creatures who benefit from interacting with others, “people will try to dismiss that it’s also important to spend time alone,” he said. “It’s hard for them to imagine that you can have both.”

“Some people make their solitude experience entirely about other people,” Dr. Nguyen added. Research has shown that people often feel inhibited from enjoying activities alone, especially when they think others are watching them. Overestimating how much other people are paying attention to us, and worrying that we are being judged, can stop us from doing things that would otherwise bring us joy.

Being alone with your thoughts, and giving yourself the space and unstructured time to let your mind wander without social distractions, can also sometimes feel intimidating, said Angela Grice, a speech language pathologist who has conducted research on executive functions and neuroscience at Howard University and the Neurocognition of Language Lab at Columbia University.

“There have been studies that show when we are by ourselves, what is uncomfortable is the lack of stimuli, that you can’t rely on other people to shape your experience in a certain way,” Dr. Nguyen said.

Our aversion to being alone can be quite drastic: A quarter of the women and two-thirds of the men in a University of Virginia study chose to subject themselves to an electric shock rather than do nothing and spend time alone with their thoughts.

Why it’s good to spend time alone

An online survey called The Rest Test showed that the majority of activities people defined as most restful are things that are done solo.

Despite the social stigma and apprehension about spending time alone, it is something our bodies crave. Similar to how loneliness describes being alone and wanting company, “aloneliness” can be used to describe the natural desire for solitude, Dr. Coplan said. Since we’re not used to labeling that feeling, it can easily be confused for, and feed into, other feelings like anxiety, exhaustion and stress, especially since “we might not know that time alone is what we need to make ourselves feel better,” Dr. Coplan added.

Enjoying the benefits of time alone is not a question of being an introvert or extrovert, Dr. Nguyen said. More consistently, people who value solitude and who tend not to ignore their own desires in the pursuit of pleasing others will find time alone more enjoyable, she said.

The freedom of not having to follow the lead of others, with “no pressure to do anything, no pressure to talk to anyone, no obligation to make plans with people,” is a great way to process and decompress, even for highly social individuals, Ms. Roberts said. It also helps us discover new interests and ideas without having to worry about the opinions of others — one study even showed that teens are less self-conscious when they are alone.

“Cultivating this sense of being alone and making the choice to be alone can help you to develop who you are, your sense of self, and what your true interests are,” Dr. Grice said. Knowing oneself makes it easier to find other people who share your passions, and can improve your empathy. It can also help you re-evaluate “filler” friendships: relationships you maintain because you would rather do anything on a Friday night besides staying at home by yourself, even at the cost of spending time with people whose company you do not enjoy.

Time with your thoughts sans social distractions can also be restorative, build your confidence and make it easier for you to maintain boundaries, Ms. Roberts said. In addition, it can boost productivity, engagement with others and creativity, and a study published in *Current Directions in*

Psychological Science found that brainstorming was enhanced when participants alternated between brainstorming alone and with a group.

How to do it

In a twist on the golden rule: treat yourself as you would treat others. Do not flake. Be open to exploring new interests. Make space in your life and put in the time, even if it is just spending 30 minutes a week reading at a cafe.

If you are just getting started, “take small steps,” Dr. Grice suggests. Time spent alone is a great opportunity to explore new interests, but it does not mean you have to totally push yourself outside of your comfort zone. In addition, if the thought of spending time alone is especially stressful or triggering, that could be an important sign that you may need professional support, Dr. Grice adds.

Yet, if you’re at a loss as to how to jump in, “plan out something that you know that you will enjoy doing, maybe something that helps you feel more productive, or helps you be more relaxed,” Dr. Nguyen said.

If you are having an especially hard time listening to the thoughts inside your head, journaling can be a great way of working through and evaluating those emotions, Ms. Roberts said. Though it is tempting, “try not to be on your phone, because it’s too big of a distraction.” Instead, Dr. Coplan suggests reading, making crafts, going to a movie, grabbing a meal, visiting a park, trying to learn a new skill or any one of the infinite options available besides making your alone time about other people and obsessively checking social media.

Ultimately, each person will have a different ideal balance between how much time they spend alone and with others, but “nobody is going to be optimally served by doing only one or the other,” he said.

Above all, the most important step in being able to reap the benefits of time alone is simple, Dr. Nguyen said: “Take the opportunity to say, ‘This is the time where I can give something to myself,’ and just endorse that, in this moment, you are your first choice.”