You Can Learn to Love Being Alone

Solitude doesn't have to feel lonely. It can be restoring and refreshing with a little practice.

- Feb. 24, 2022

Sally Snowman loves to be alone. As the keeper of Boston Light, a centuries-old lighthouse on Little Brewster Island in Boston Harbor, she's had a lot of practice. For most of the last 19 years, she's lived there from April through October.

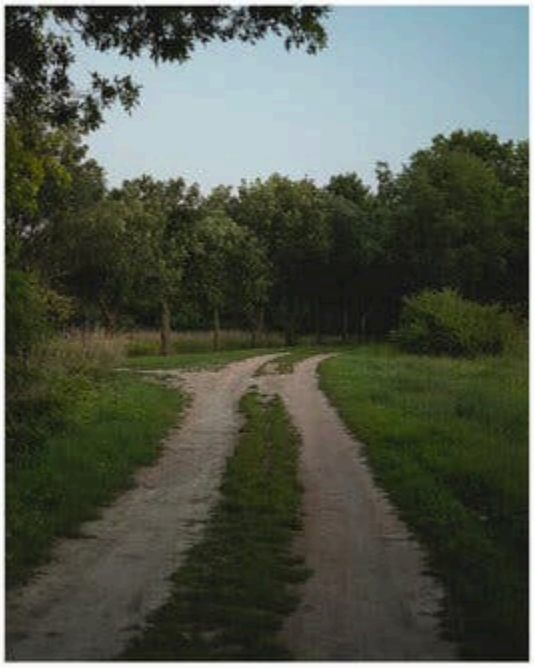
She fills the days with work, cleaning the windows, mowing the lawn and sweeping the spiral staircase of the 90-foot lighthouse tower. She reads a lot and has watched a lot of sunsets. And she relishes every minute.

"It's a relief to be out on the island," Ms. Snowman, 70, said. When she's by herself, "the wheels stop spinning." Her time alone is restorative.

But not everyone feels the same way about solitude, and for the last two years, the pandemic has forced some version of it upon us all. We've seen fewer friends and spent more time at home. Some people have found themselves feeling lonelier, particularly if they were already single or living alone.

As we enter a new phase of the pandemic that's less "wipe down your groceries" and more "welp, I guess this is our new normal," occasional periods of isolation may be something we just fold into our lives, like digital vaccination cards or having a dedicated drawer for masks.

Whether you're hoping for more time alone or less these days, solitude is something you can learn to appreciate.



Solitude is more enjoyable if you're in control of it.

How we feel about time alone is largely dependent on whether we've chosen it, said Virginia Thomas, an assistant professor of psychology at Middlebury College who studies solitude.

People who pursue solitude of their own volition "tend to report that it feels full — like they're full of ideas or thoughts or things to do," Dr. Thomas said. In this way, it's distinct from loneliness, a negative state in which you're "disconnected from other people and it feels empty."

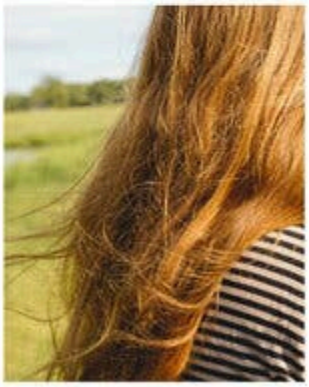
The key is to see solitude as a choice, not a punishment. In a 2019 survey, Dr. Thomas found that teenagers who deliberately sought out solitude showed higher levels of well-being and were less lonely than their peers who were alone just because of circumstances. The same was true in young adults ages 18 to 25, who also showed increased levels of personal growth and self-acceptance, and lower levels of depression. In fact, most research shows that we benefit more from solitude as we age, Dr. Thomas said, as we develop more control over our time, along with better cognitive and emotional skills to help us use it more constructively.

Jenn Drummond, a mountaineer in Park City, Utah, has spent a lot of time alone as she trains to become the first woman to climb the Seven Second Summits, the second highest — and generally more difficult — mountains on each continent. If she catches herself "getting into a mopey pattern," she reminds herself that she's in charge.

"Loneliness is happening *to* me," Ms. Drummond, 41, said. "Solitude is happening *for* me. That little shift makes the biggest difference."

You can learn to like it, even if you're not an introvert.

You might assume it's just introverts who benefit from solitude, but research is mixed on whether they are actually more skilled at being alone, Dr. Thomas said. In her view, "anyone, with any personality, can enjoy it — with one caveat: if they know how to use it well."



That means deciding what you want from your time, whether it's processing a tough situation, tapping into creativity or just enjoying five cumulative minutes without someone under five asking you for something.

Without a goal "we're just going to be throwing spaghetti at the wall, and that can elicit a false sense of failure, like 'Oh, I'm just not good at being alone,'" said Gina Moffa, a grief and trauma psychotherapist in New York City.

Solitude can have a calming effect on our minds and bodies, which may be off-putting to people who usually equate happiness with feeling energized, Dr. Thomas said. They often just feel bored or restless.

The key to dispelling the discomfort is to replace it with something enjoyable. If you don't know where to start, "think of something you like doing in general, and then try doing it by yourself," Ms. Moffa said.

And no, doom scrolling Twitter doesn't count as healthy solitude. In a 2020 study, Dr. Thomas followed 69 participants for a week, concluding that they were more emotionally satisfied with their solitude when they were truly alone, without their phones, than when they were alone but still on their phones.

“If you want to connect with yourself or feel calm or creative, is scrolling social media going to get you what you need?” she said. Most of the time, the answer is no.

There are ways to make solitude easier.

Former NASA astronaut Jim “Ox” van Hoften has experienced a very particular solitude; during his missions to space in the 1980s, he was isolated from his family, his routine and, quite literally, the world.

And yet, “there were only a few times I felt like I was really on my own,” Dr. van Hoften, 77, said. Although the crew could reach ground control for only 20 minutes out of every 90-minute orbit, he still felt bolstered by support. Even in outer space, “you’re never alone, you always have somebody helping,” he said.

That applies on Earth too. Checking in with a friend can still be part of your solitude ritual, Ms. Moffa said. In fact, “having the space to do that while we’re in this place of solitude can make the communication deeper and the connection more authentic, because we’re without the many layers of distractions around us.”

You can also do a solitary activity but share it communally. Ms. Moffa is part of a group chat with friends who text each other their Wordle scores every day. “We all do this thing quietly on our own, but it becomes something that connects us when we share it,” she said.

Solitude can also involve silence, which has been found to lower stress, improve sleep and help decision-making in some people. But without structure, it can feel intimidating, said Eloise Skinner, who spent a year training as a monk in a modern monastic community.

Practice getting comfortable with silence during small moments in your day, first while actively doing something else — like cooking or walking — and then, for more of a challenge, while just sitting still. In the monastic community, "all times of silence have a purpose to them," Ms. Skinner, 30, said. Adding a framework to your silence — by writing in a journal or listening to your breath — can make it more satisfying.

If you just need to hear another voice, there's no shame in making it your own. Liz Thomas, 36, a professional long-distance hiker who has backpacked 10,000 miles alone, gives herself pep talks using her trail name, Snorkel. "I'll say, 'Come on, Snorkel, you've got to get this tent up,'" she said. Talking to herself in the second person soothes her worries, something researchers also found in a 2014 study.

You can find solitude anywhere.
Sally Snowman hasn't stayed overnight on Little Brewster Island since 2019. She still goes several times a week for routine maintenance, but the Coast Guard is in the process of transferring stewardship of the lighthouse and doesn't need her there as much.

Recapturing the sense of calm she felt out there has been "the ultimate challenge" on the mainland, she said. She's started visiting a local park at off-peak hours, "looking beyond the man-made aspects and just focusing on the trees." Then she tries to bottle that peacefulness and contentment and bring it home. "Find a place you feel connected to," she said. "Then practice finding that place inside of you without literally having to go there."