# FIND MORE ALONE TIME

## (WITHOUT BEING LONELY)

**There are proven benefits to spending time by yourself. Learn to give yourself a time-out that feels like a restorative treat, not a punishment.**

BY MELANIE MANNARINO
ILLUSTRATIONS BY GRACIA LAM

**IF YOU'RE ONE OF THE RARE PEOPLE** who like spending time by themselves, enjoy this article as validation of your natural instincts. If, on the other hand, you're among those who would rather endure physical pain than spend time alone with your thoughts (true story: in a 2014 study published in *Science*, many of the participants preferred to give themselves electric shocks rather than spend 6 to 15 minutes by themselves with nothing to do), we'd like to change your mind about solitude.

People who value their alone time are often accused of being antisocial, aloof, or just plain weird. But recent research has uncovered positive benefits of solo time. "Studies show

people feel rejuvenated when they are alone," says Julie Bowker, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo in New York whose 2017 study revealed that unsociability—defined as deliberately withdrawing from social situations and choosing to be alone—was linked to an increase in creativity.

And those aren't the only benefits of alone time, says Jack Fong, PhD, a professor of sociology at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, who has studied solitude. "Today people feel overloaded being connected to the grid, and they've lost their ability to engage with the self," he explains. "When you're alone, you regain your center of gravity. You're forced to confront yourself and get to know who you really are." The payoff? "Solitude builds self-esteem, clarity, and empathy."

### Frame Your Mindset

While being alone has benefits, feeling lonely does not. Loneliness—a real or perceived feeling of social isolation—has been proven to be a risk factor for heart disease, stroke, and depression, and studies show it can raise levels of stress hormones and inflammation. "Loneliness typically refers to a dissatisfaction with your personal relationships in terms of quality or quantity," explains Bowker. "You can be lonely in the presence of others, not just when you are alone."

It's that fear of loneliness that keeps some of us from seeking solitude. But when you reframe the idea of solitude as something positive that you deserve—something that will help you grow—it's easier to separate the two ideas.

"Aloneness is an opportunity rather than something that is painful or threatening," says psychotherapist Lauren Mackler, the author of *Solemate: Master the Art of Aloneness and Transform Your Life*. "Generally speaking, from childhood we're taught to avoid being alone at all costs, but it can help you feel whole from the inside out, in balance and content with yourself."



SOME DAYS IT FEELS IMPOSSIBLE TO SQUEEZE A SHAMPOO INTO THE SCHEDULE, MUCH LESS FIND THE TIME TO NURTURE YOUR CREATIVITY AND SELF-ESTEEM.

### Get to Know You Better

It all sounds so positive—and yet. When we spend time alone, we might end up taking a long and sometimes hard look at our feelings and behaviors, introspection that is easier to avoid in the hustle of everyday life. "Lots of people are not able to appreciate their own company," explains Fong. "People who don't tend toward solitude may be escaping, not holding themselves accountable for their actions toward others."

If that sounds heavy, Mackler has a lighter take. "A critical component for having a healthy relationship with yourself is self-compassion," she says. "People are hard on themselves, feel bad about themselves. They think they're not good enough." When you let go of your self-judgments, you'll find you enjoy your own company more.

### Carve Out Solo Time

Some days it feels impossible to squeeze a shampoo into the schedule, much less find the time to nurture your creativity and self-esteem. But experts emphasize that each of us can find moments of solitude that best suit our lives. "You don't have to say, 'OK, family, fend for yourself for three months. I'm off to India!'" says Mackler. "It can be as simple as taking an hour or two for yourself each week."

Or even less, especially if this is new to you. "Start with short periods of time—10 minutes, 15 minutes," says Bowker. "See what happens—whether you enjoy it and how you feel afterward."

What you do is up to you. In an international study on rest conducted by BBC Radio 4 and a group including researchers from Durham University in England, the top two most restful activities cited by participants were reading and "being in the natural environment"—both excellent ways to spend time alone. But not the only ways.

"You don't have to be productive or meditate. Sometimes just being alone and doing nothing might be most beneficial. If you feel like it's a stress reduction, it's rejuvenating, and it makes you better able to connect with yourself, then go for it," says Bowker. Perhaps the most crucial thing, Fong says, is going about your alone time intentionally and confidently. "Acknowledging to yourself that you're going to spend time alone develops courage, a boldness."

Fong does stress the importance of enjoying solo time for yourself, not for a social media moment. "Don't go to the beach by yourself and practice solitude for two hours, then go on Facebook to blab about it," he says. "Go for 15 minutes, tell no one, and enjoy. You don't need validation. The point is that you are validating yourself."

# MEET ME AT THE MOVIES

**Sitting in the dark with a bag of popcorn, one proud extrovert found a way to escape a stressful job—and enjoy her own company.**

BY CADY LANG

**THERE ARE VERY FEW PLACES** to have a private moment in New York City. I discovered this one afternoon as I gulped back tears on a hectic corner outside the midtown Manhattan department store where I had just gotten a job selling shoes. After a long day of demanding customers, feeling the unshakable sense that I had made a mistake moving to a new city, all I wanted was to be alone. It would take over an hour on a crowded subway train in the sticky heat to get back to my apartment in Brooklyn. I saw the small movie theater across the street and

ducked in, spending two hours in the dark, completely free of human contact, watching Kristen Wiig and Bill Hader in *The Skeleton Twins.* It was bliss.

This desire was new and unsettling. I'd always prided myself on being an extrovert. I made friends easily, could small-talk with anyone, and was "the life of the party." My identity, from my astrological sign (Leo) to my Myers-Briggs personality type (ENTJ), was completely wrapped up in being a social butterfly, a persona that allowed me to avoid confronting the fact that I was terrified of being alone with my thoughts and anxieties. It took this surprisingly soothing outing and the challenges of a new city and job to show me that time by myself could be relaxing, invigorating, and actually pleasurable.

Since I was working retail by day and writing at night, I had an unconventional schedule that meant my nights and weekends (prime socializing hours for my friends who worked 9-to-5 jobs) were my new workweek. On my days off, usually Mondays and Tuesdays, the last thing I wanted to do was interact with more people after hearing a perpetual deluge of "Do you have this in a size 7½?" It was on those days that I treated myself to a movie and a bag of buttery popcorn, relishing the cool, dark stillness of the theater and the stories on the big screen.

I especially loved going to weekday matinees because there was rarely anyone else in the theater, so it felt a little like playing hooky—further confirmation that this was my alone time. And during a period when money was tight, it was a casual luxury to sit quietly with myself in a city that demanded so much of me. Over the course of a summer, I grew to be comfortable with who I was when I was alone.

Although I no longer sell shoes and now have a more conventional workweek, I still make time to go to the movies by myself. Some days, I'll even sneak away to catch a midweek matinee so I can sit in a nearly empty theater. Each time reminds me that sometimes I'm the best company of all.

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# A HOTEL ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

**One new mom couldn't wait to go on vacation by herself—until she got away and the guilt set in.**

BY ANNA MALTBY

**AS WITH EVERYTHING** about parenthood, I thought I knew how I'd feel about being alone post-baby, but when alone time arrived, it felt completely different.

What I'd assumed: Babies are loud and difficult. The opportunity to step away and be by myself—for an hour, for a day—would always be welcome.

What I learned: Babies are loud and difficult. The opportunity to step away for an hour is wonderful—and coming back to the baby is even more wonderful. More than a day is harder. Missing bedtime more than one night in a row is almost unthinkable. Doing any of this while nursing is exhausting.

So I waited. Yes, I went back to work full-time. I booked the occasional manicure or yoga class. I even went away for a one-night girlfriends' getaway when my son was 5 months old, during which I cried spying on my husband putting him to bed via our video-monitor app while the rest of the group cried laughing watching Tiffany Haddish in *Girls Trip.*

But as time passed, alone time seemed more appealing, even as my son turned into a small person I genuinely enjoyed being with. So, soon after he was weaned, I booked a three-night trip to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. I told everyone about the trip. I couldn't wait!

And then I arrived, and it was, ostensibly, heaven. My room at the Conrad was enormous, with a glorious ocean view. I was walking distance from a Mexican restaurant with an incredible happy-hour menu. I bought a hideous hat and an inner tube and floated by myself in the ocean. I read two Liane Moriarty novels.

Yet I felt...itchy. Even as I marveled over how awesome everything was, I texted my husband, my best friend, and my mother telling them to see if there were any cheap flights to Fort Lauderdale. It was so odd: I was happy! I didn't actually feel lonely!

I missed the baby, but not terribly! But I couldn't handle being alone.

I wouldn't figure out the cause until later, when my trip was over: I felt guilty. Not for being away—my in-laws were there to help my husband, and I knew my son would be just fine. What I felt guilty about was the bounty. Some part of me felt I didn't deserve a 1,000-square-foot hotel room and beautiful pastel sunsets and warm ocean water and an inner tube all to myself. Those were things that should be shared.

Eventually, I settled in. I spent time with those sunsets. I drank coffee on the balcony each morning. I did those freaky-looking face masks every night. I ordered a far-too-large margarita and read. I came home feeling more like myself than I had in months. And, of course, that "self" was different from what I felt like before the kid came along (or what I imagined I'd feel like later). But it was wonderful too.

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