

LIFESTYLE



THE **i**PAPER



## LOVE MYSELF

Solo living has been romanticised, but it's time we spoke honestly about what it's like to wake up in an empty flat every day

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'All I want is to laugh along to a film with someone or hold hands around the park—an entirely valid feeling, which shouldn't come with a side of shame,' says Cat Thompson



**Cat Thompson**

There's a movement quietly taking hold on **social media**. Singledom has taken on a new dimension. It's been repackaged as an art form; an impermeable, sacred solitude to be mastered by those of us chronically unattached. Pastel images of foam-swept lattes or swirling two-tone

iced coffees perspiring next to ornate journals or leather-bound literary novels abound on lonely user feeds.

Instagrammers like thirty-something singleton Sophie F Williams advise followers to “learn to enjoy spending time alone and value it. Don’t feel sad about it”. She suggests: “Book girls’ trips and find a hobby.” But this kind of advice can skim over the realities of singledom. Many singletons may not have the luxury of a space to host dinner parties and, like me, enough thirty/forty-something friends available to attend thywithout months of advanced planning – let alone a “girls’ trip”.

Late last year, a *Vogue* article titled “Is Having a Boyfriend Embarrassing Now?” lamented on the “lameness” of boyfriends in an era of “heterofatalism”. The conversation followed a wave of female influencers deleting or obscuring pictures with their partners after romantic content appeared to dent their following. But while the need to move away from internalised norms of centring men – and cat-lady tropes – is real, it gives rise to a different kind of **pressure for those who still believe in romance**, who may feel quietly diminished by the suggestion that enjoying a relationship status is cringey.

It’s easy to romanticise singledom with its freedom and uncompromised “me-time” in abundance. Even I, a chronic singleton on the cusp of 40, have fallen for the lazy Sunday marketing approach in all its filtered glory. But, in reality, my default disposition is more Bridget Jones than the cottage-core aesthetic promoted by **Instagram**. My oversized pyjamas are drafty and approximately two glasses of wine into a film I find myself noting down self-improvement goals.

Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy solitude. I have been in relationships where a day or evening to myself feels like the equivalent of a mini-break; no compromise, no expectations, no judgement for my choice of music, podcasts nor the trashy TV I’m occasionally partial to; bingeing a family bag of crisps instead of a meal and double-dipping to my heart’s content. But singledom isn’t just one heady continuation of *Home Alone* like some influencers would have you believe.

My longest relationship was around six years and it was largely happy – we built so many memories I smile about to this day. But, as with many **relationships**, it wasn’t to be. We ended in my early 30s, around the time an onslaught of weddings, baby showers, first birthday parties ensued among family and friend circles. Although it was the right decision, losing a best friend, someone who had known me like no one else, felt like a bereavement.

Psychotherapist and life coach Aimee Barnes talks about how singledom is not an identity and should not make us feel “less than” – a conviction I wholeheartedly share. There’s power in showing up alone and socialising without a “back-up” – but, admittedly, sometimes the feeling of never having a plus-one weighs heavy. I was recently at a friend’s 40th birthday party, heaving with couples and kids and, while I didn’t feel self-conscious attending by myself, leaving – no

partner to give the private “let’s go” signal, no one to unpick the day’s events on the journey home – and arriving to an empty flat sent a twisting ache through my gut. When you’re always coming home to and waking up to silence, its accumulative roar rattles deep, like ghosts of futures that never were. The feeling can’t be banished through solo-picnics, journaling and people-watching alone – I know because I’ve tried.

I follow individuals and communities of women, either single, child-free or both, on social media, where managing loneliness and filling silence is a common thread. However, such posts fall prey to dismissive responses like “the grass is greener” – with those in a relationship unburdening the woes of being romantically tied. Another frustrating line is “you can be in a room full of people and still be lonely”, or even worse, the suggestion you’re lonely because you’re “not enough”. Then there’s the dreaded cliché: “Love yourself.”

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If you’re in a relationship, trotting out tired clichés when your single friends are honest about feelings of loneliness or heart-aching absence is incredibly unhelpful. Instead, just listen. Don’t tell them to have a bath or compare your relationship irks – acknowledge their single-person ones, otherwise that kind of dismissal risks reinforcing the invisibility single people have long been trying to outrun.

Author and podcaster Shani Silver is among those calling out the weary “love yourself” rhetoric. In a TikTok video she points out that prioritising yourself and desiring a relationship can both be true at once. That you can live with intention, practice self-care yet still feel that infamous ache. Similarly, psychologist Fiona Murden calls the phrase an “oversimplified self-help slogan”. She doesn’t completely disregard the sentiment, but says “learning to love yourself” can lead people to become stuck in a search for “mythical inner peace”. She puts it best when she says “loving and being loved isn’t about having it figured out... but it’s still worth investing the time in learning to love yourself along the way”.

As my on-off dating life can attest, those of us on the apps are always *doing the work*. It takes a thick skin to become used to the ghosting, awkward dates and disappointment. And an even thicker layer to weather the raging sense of absence when so many dates become an investment only to be squandered weeks or months later, until they’re eventually filed under “character-building”. To accept it’s not personal, that some people are still figuring out what (or who) they want. It’s a disorientating and emotionally laborious experience but with each one comes a lesson and I learn something about myself – including knowing the kind of person I want to be with. Finding them, it seems, is just a small matter of patience.

Until then, I better dust off my notebook – and pour myself a large wine.



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