

Intentional

Solitude

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Essential

Art

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Solitude. It's more than just being alone. Psychologists Christopher Long and James Averill define solitude as "disengagement from the immediate demands of other people—a state of reduced social inhibition and increased freedom to select one's mental or physical activities." Given its potential to contribute to our wellness and growth, intentional solitude is something that we should all engage in. However, since social interaction also plays a vital role in our emotional and physical wellbeing,

we can easily enter into a negative space if we don't have a personal understanding of how we function at our best and at our worst in solitude.

Loneliness. Self-consciousness. A lack of accountability. Existential crises. Emptiness. A lack of perspective. In an anonymous survey that I carried out, young women shared that these experiences are why solitude is sometimes a struggle for them. Psychology expert Kendra Cherry echoes this sentiment in an article for Very Well Mind, explaining that some of the main reasons why people may find solitude difficult include: a lack of experience being alone, distressing thoughts and feelings and social stigma.

If we are yet to learn how to utilise our alone time, recognise when we simply need to be in the presence of others or seek out a safe space, it becomes easy for us to view solitude in a negative light and avoid it instead of experiencing the beauty that can come from it.

That's why intentional solitude is such a delicate art. There's no blueprint or 'one-size-fits-all' guide to figuring these things out—introspection is the key to developing this unique knowledge about ourselves. While it may not always be easy to digest, identifying and appropriately addressing when and how solitude isn't in our best interest enables us to approach intentional solitude from a healthier state of mind.

For example, one respondent said that she sometimes uses solitude as a coping mechanism when she gets overwhelmed, which can make her feel even worse. As uncomfortable as this may be, this contextual awareness of her relationship with solitude contributes to forming the personal reference guide that we should all have with regard to our behaviours, feelings and emotions. This can help us prevent intentional solitude being a counterproductive activity for us in future.

Freedom to be one's authentic self. Time to reflect. Building trust in oneself. A lack of social pressure. Time to recharge. Peace of mind. Even though many admit that they don't take enough time for themselves, these women have also said that those experiences are what have made solitude enjoyable and beneficial. One respondent even shared that she has noticed her body positively change when she's taken the time to be in intentional solitude: "From my skin to [my] digestive system, I just feel and look different". Clinical psychologist Joanna Cates supports the idea that purposeful solitude is essential for our wellness and growth in a HuffPost article in which she highlights that it allows us to tune into our inner self, rejuvenate, discover more about ourselves and grow in our independence. Research also suggests that

practising intentional solitude strengthens creativity because it leads to us using our imagination and generating new thought patterns,

according to Michigan State University.

Given that the potential fruits of a healthy engagement in intentional solitude are so plentiful, we owe it to ourselves to develop a contextual understanding of our current relationship with solitude, learn how we can navigate it purposefully and work through any fears that we have of the process. Like nutrients that enable us to grow, experimenting, exploring, challenging ourselves and reflecting on other people's stories play a major role in the introspection and self-work that we need to do to make this happen. But the seed that precedes all of this is our embracing of intentional solitude as an integral part of our wellness journey.