

## ***The Loneliness Epidemic Has Hit Gen Z – But Why Can't They Stop Scrolling?***

*“Instead of living my life, I live my life through the life of others on social media”. Gen Z are so preoccupied with everyone else’s lives, that they’re forgetting to live their own*



**Photo:** Bruce Allinson (2023) Woman Scrolling on Holiday

Picture this: You’ve left school and have moved in with your first romantic partner – a young adult’s dream, right? Unlike most others your age, you’ve started your first full-time job and have money to go out, pay rent and enjoy life with no rules or parental supervision. Freedom is at your fingertips. Supposedly. Well, this was the idea for Liberty Richardson, a 27-year-old Domestic Abuse Safety Officer from Hastings, who dropped out of school at the age of 17 due to ongoing mental health struggles. After taking a couple of years out to focus on her mental health, she moved in with her (ex) partner and started working full-time in her local O2 shop.

Liberty quickly learned that her set-up wasn’t as “dreamy” as she once envisioned as a lovestruck teenager. Her (ex) partner didn’t enjoy her having friends and brainwashed her into thinking it was because they were toxic for her mental health. In reality, he wanted her all for himself. And she trusted him. Fooled into his mind games, Liberty drifted apart from her friends

from school. Soon enough, the only way she kept up to date was by scrolling through social media - first out of curiosity, then out of habit. She was deeply lonely and isolated from those around her, which only intensified the desire to scroll further.

Liberty recalls one moment whilst scrolling through Instagram posts of her friends finishing their A-Levels, taking gap years, and starting university when she realised how distant she's become from the people she grew up with, and how "behind" she was in life. She felt extremely disconnected from her friends who were finishing their A-Levels, attending university, or going travelling. As a result of her crippling self-esteem, she didn't question her boyfriend's discontent with her having friends; instead, she used the toxic relationship as an opportunity to keep her life small and well within her comfort zone.

"I was just in this echo chamber of watching what everyone else from school was doing on social media, meanwhile I was very stagnant, not really doing anything and just sort of existing". The lines between her online and offline life became increasingly blurred as she struggled to leave the house, let alone try and make any new friends or create some form of meaning in her life. Her social media usage increased. Whilst she had nothing to say or post, scrolling became a convenient way to distract and escape from her unsatisfactory life.

Just before the pandemic, Liberty broke up with her ex-boyfriend and moved into a one-bedroom flat in Tunbridge Wells on her own. However, unable to break out of the habit, she remembers a time when "my Instagram was flooded with graduation photos, travelling adventures and perfect relationships," she says. "I spent hours scrolling through post after post, despite it making me feel so low and depressed. I don't think I've ever had such low self-esteem as I had then".

### **Growing Up as Digital Natives During The Pandemic**

Liberty's experience is far from unique. With [19% of 16-24-year-olds in the UK reporting "often" or "always" feeling lonely](#) post-lockdown, Gen Z has been deemed, by research, "the loneliest generation"; which seems unusual, considering they're also the [most connected](#) online. As "[digital natives](#)", they're the first generation to grow up with the internet as part of their daily lives. "This constant exposure means their social and emotional development has been deeply connected with their online interactions," Psychology Expert and Life Coach, [Bayu Prihandito](#) says.

For Liberty, from the age of 17, social media was a constant reminder of how different her life was from others her age. She dropped out of school and started working, whilst her friends were taking gap years or starting degrees. She plunged into her first (failed) long-term relationship, whilst others were having flings and experimenting with their sexuality. And she moved into a single-bed flat, alone; so far removed from those posting selfies in their uni halls or lovey-dovey captions about the “the one” they met at fresher’s fayre. But even though it made her feel like she was doing life wrong, she couldn’t pull herself away from the polarising grip of the screen. The lack of risk that came with watching the lives of others from behind a screen was more appealing than the potential of getting rejected when trying to make deep, meaningful connections offline.

The pandemic made these lonely experiences worse. “Everyone on social media started posting quizzes that they were doing with their friends and different ways they were socialising online. I didn’t have any of that,” Liberty recalls. “I had no one to socialise with during lockdown, it was just me”. Along with the [35% of young people](#) who said they felt lonely often or most of the time during the pandemic despite spending three hours on social media, scrolling through what everyone else was doing only intensified Liberty’s feelings of loneliness and perceived inability to make friends in real life. Whilst physical contact was prohibited, “there was a natural gravitation towards social media as a window to the outside world, which led to a 76% [increase in screen time](#) among Gen Z,” Prihandito says. “During the pandemic, it was like a perfect storm of tech exploding and us all feeling like we needed to be on every app to connect with everybody,” UK-based counsellor, [Georgina Sturmer](#) adds.

21-year-old gap year student from Gloucestershire, Neve Smith, started a Biological Sciences Degree at the University of Southampton at the height of the pandemic. This meant she only started attending in-person lectures in her second year. “Not many of us knew each other and it was a new experience for a majority of students,” she says. “I found a group of coursemates to sit with in lectures, but making actual friends after a little to no interaction the year before was hard”. Neve found herself increasingly reliant on her phone to keep her company, she almost missed how “easy” socialising was when the only option was her screen.

### **Gen Z Is Struggling to Make Friends IRL**

Neve’s mental health deteriorated as she failed to live up to the pressure she felt to make new friends at university after the pandemic. She’s not alone. Almost two years later, the experience of not being able to connect in real life has made it even [harder for digital natives to feel confident socialising](#) without the crutch of a screen. 26-year-old TikToker, [Amy](#)

[Stockwell](#), reveals that she still has no friends after moving to London three years ago to start a degree at Kingston University during the pandemic. On top of moving away from her friends and family and living alone for the first time, her university lectures were online which created separation between her and her peers; and she has struggled to make friends ever since.

Although Neve attended freshers' events, exchanging social media handles with other students, she was never actually invited out. Instead, she found herself scrolling through her Instagram stories to see the same people out with other freshers they had met. "It made me feel like I'm not good enough," Neve says. "Watching it all through a lens felt very toxic, but also very difficult to distance myself from. Social media is the way people my age connect". Neve would then scroll through old school friends hanging out with new students they'd met on their course. "Sat alone in my university halls on a Saturday night, I couldn't help but feel envious". Since the pandemic, Neve has felt increasingly anxious about meeting new people as she's [scared of being rejected](#). With a history of mental health issues, her university encouraged her to take a gap year from studying to focus on getting her mental health back on track.

In September this year, Neve returned home to Gloucestershire, where [her social anxiety](#) continued to get in the way of making friends in real life. "I'll be having an off-day and not want to socialise, let alone actively go and try and meet new people. Then, I go on Instagram and everyone else is out and about at university, doing something with friends. It makes me feel so lonely, down and demotivated to even try". Neve's experience is an example of what Noreena Hertz, author of [The Lonely Century](#), describes as "BOMP" – the belief that others are more popular. It is a similar experience to "FOMO" (fear of missing out), but arguably more painful as it thrives on the feeling of "being friendless in a world where everyone has friends", according to Hertz.

In her professional practice, Sturmer notes how striking the rise of loneliness has been amongst her existing Gen Z clients since the pandemic. "It's been difficult for many of them to shrug off the social anxiety and disconnection that they felt during those years," she says. She highlights the [lack of social skills](#) "digital natives" have developed has made it even harder to integrate back into normal life and interact with others. "With this age group, we can't separate the impact of the pandemic on feelings of loneliness and the fact they came of age with the rise of social media".

"Since the pandemic, I've found it so daunting to meet someone for the first time in person because I get very stressed about whether people like me or not," Neve says. "That's why I

find it much easier to socialise via social media rather than trying to make friends in person". Sturmer notes that for digital natives, social media can act as a comfort blanket as "real-life interactions somehow feel more scary, more intimate, more intimidating". As a result, Gen Z is experiencing [severe loneliness and social anxiety post-lockdown](#), with many avoiding social situations altogether to avoid potential judgement or embarrassment.

Even though [56% of young people](#), like Neve, say that seeing friends having fun on social media harms their feelings of loneliness, "Unlike real-life situations that are often unpredictable and require immediate responses, social media allows them to interact at their own pace in a more predictable and controlled manner," Prihandito explains. "This is particularly appealing for those who may feel anxious or less confident in face-to-face interactions".

Imagine: you turn up to a school reunion and lurk in the corner without saying hello to anyone. Or even worse, you linger outside; peering through the window whilst everyone else is having fun, heart pounding. Well, for someone who is socially anxious, the idea of these in real-life rejection-worthy situations can be incredibly overbearing. For them, seeking validation and belonging from behind a screen allows them to employ a degree of control over how others perceive them. "Social media offers the opportunity to filter their images, to edit what they write, and to choose what they share," Sturmer notes.

### **If It's Making Them Lonely, Why Don't They Stop Scrolling?**

UK-based 27-year-old British content creator Beth, with over 250K followers on TikTok, has lived alone in a rented flat since 2019. For her, social media has become the most convenient way to connect. However, in March this year, she posted a [video](#) after realising that her life had been consumed by loneliness. Beth works from home full-time and doesn't have any friends or a partner to spend time with. "I spend six out of seven days a week alone without any human contact," she says. She only sees work colleagues once a week and occasionally visits family on the weekend. "My friends and family are all at different stages of their lives to me," she says. "Some of them have a partner, some have a house, some have a baby, and some have all three. Then there's me".

For the past two years, Beth's been posting daily TikToks after receiving a [late ADHD diagnosis](#) in her mid-twenties. Before her diagnosis, Beth didn't know why she had always felt like such an outsider in life. She's been documenting her revelations as someone who has extreme social anxiety and avoids leaving her flat unless she has to which, despite her social isolation, has allowed her to network with others in the ADHD community.

However, actively posting on social media isn't Beth's problem; in fact, this has given her a real sense of purpose as she openly shares her experience with ADHD to help others feel less alone. Beth admits to having a "crippling phone addiction" which involves her [passively scrolling](#) through TikTok videos of other's romantic getaways and friendship "goals" for up to eight hours a day, which she thinks is the reason she's lost her spark and started to lose the joy in life's simple pleasures. "I live my life through the lives of others on social media," she says, "I see people sharing their special memories with a loved one or having a good time with their friends, all whilst I sit behind the screen and watch, alone," Beth continues.

Beth is aware of how her ["social media addiction"](#) has contributed to her feelings of loneliness in her twenties; and though her eight-hour-a-day screen time (significantly longer than your average school day) may seem extreme, [72% of Gen Z is deemed "potential addicts"](#) – using their phone for an average of four to five hours a day. Even so, Beth still doesn't understand why she's so disconnected from her life and what, aside from her ADHD, may've led her to this point.

"Within two minutes of waking up and opening my eyes, I'm on TikTok," she says. "I'm living my life by watching everyone else living their life; stuck in a [cycle of social comparison](#)". Like Beth, even though it makes Neve feel lonely, "continuous snapshots of what others are up to is the first thing I see in the morning and the last thing I see at night," she says. Even though they both want to stop, they can't resist the distraction from their daily lives. Sturmer adds: "Addiction is all about finding coping mechanisms when our needs aren't being met. So, if [young people are] already feeling lonely or anxious then social media offers a simple, accessible, and reliable coping strategy for those who are already digital natives," even if it's making them feel even worse than when they initially logged on.

Like Beth, Neve feels that she needs to be on her phone all the time; scrolling mindlessly through other's lives to distract herself from her "boring" one - seemingly unworthy of getting excited about. "My screen time went up by 25% last week, which was mostly spent scrolling on Instagram," she says. Although she works full-time at Tesco, she spends her hour-long breaks scrolling through her Instagram feed. "I might not have even directly connected with anybody, but I feel like I have when I get to the end of my Instagram feed having spent 45 minutes scrolling aimlessly through highlights, reels and post updates about their lives," she says.

Social media expert & CEO of Highkey Agency – a company that helps people build a stronger personal brand online - [Luke Lintz](#), comments on the way that social media companies are run, and what is making Gen Z so sucked into platforms like Instagram and TikTok. “Every social media company has departments within their business called [attention engineers](#),” he tells me. These are the same engineers who are hired by casinos, and their only goal is to keep viewers attentive for as long as possible. “Whenever you feel tempted to put your phone down, the site keeps drip-feeding you the kind of material that it has learnt, from your past behaviour, keeps you scrolling,” British Journalist Johann Harri writes in his book, [Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention](#).

To distract themselves from their existing lonely feelings, Liberty, Beth and Neve log onto social media and get a healthy surge of positive feelings, otherwise known as [dopamine](#). Great. However, as they carry on scrolling, too much dopamine causes their brain to overstimulate and they start to feel as they would if they were experiencing a dopamine deficiency – more stressed, anxious, and even depressed. But here’s the catch. Their brain [can't tell the difference between the cause of the dopamine \(social media\) and the result \(how it's making them feel\)](#). Therefore, instead of stopping scrolling when they notice negative feelings popping up – like FOMO or social comparison - attention engineers work tirelessly to motivate users to carry on scrolling, regardless of how it’s making them feel.

### **An Obstacle to Meaningful Connection**

However non-abrasive, this time-consuming habit of sifting through the lives of others comes at a cost of [deep, meaningful social connections](#). An overreliance on digital interactions can impact the development of crucial face-to-face skills, “such as interpreting non-verbal cues, developing empathy, and engaging in spontaneous conversation,” Prihandito says. “This can result in lower self-esteem and confidence, especially when their real-life experiences don't align with their idealized online world”.

For digital natives, who don’t know any different than to connect through a screen, the impact that technology is having on their ability to socialise is an obstacle to building fulfilling relationships. “From the point of view of a developing brain, trying to figure out what you think, what you like and who likes you from the virtue of a screen isn’t the same as a hug, conversation or physical body language from another individual”, Sturmer says. “I think what we're seeing now is it's almost like there's this generation that missed a couple of years of learning how to interact with each other,” she says.

As Beth has become older, she's become more emotionally aware of how her social isolation has led to a lack of [platonic relationships](#) in her life. In a recent [video](#) responding to a TikTok trend romanticising female friendships, Beth says: "To all the girls who are seeing this trend but don't have their girls, you're not alone. Making friends in your 20s feels like an impossible task". Beth replies to a comment from someone who also struggles with this issue; "[I] just want to be someone's person and not feel like a floater", she says.

"If we think of the [stages of development](#) from adolescence to young adulthood, Gen Z has ended up using social media to figure out who they are whilst attempting to form meaningful connections," Sturmer explains; which has impacted how confident they feel making friends in real life. Sturmer gives them the benefit of the doubt however, as she compares the way Gen Z are expected to go and make friends in the real world to "an addict being handed an addictive substance than being told not to use it". During the pandemic, the use of social media was not only socially acceptable but encouraged, which sheds light on just how nuanced and contextual this issue is.

### **Passive Vs Active: How You Use Social Media Matters**

Social media can be a positive space for [well-being](#), experts insist. However, this depends on how you use it. When used to scroll through others' feeds without ["actively" engaging](#) - by liking, commenting, or sharing other's content – the "social" aspect of social media is missing. Whilst "social media can be used to build community and define your identity when you're figuring out who you are and what you care about," London-based psychotherapist and author of the book Eloise Skinner says, "social media also has the potential to create separation".

There are [three types of social media users](#): First, those who passively scroll through the content of others without posting. Second, those who post content but don't engage with other's content. And third, people who post their content and interact with other users. The way users engage with social media massively affects how they come away feeling, regardless of how much time they spend on the sites. For example, even though Gen Z and millennials have very similar screen times, millennials are much [more "active" social media users](#) – with 32% posting either daily or multiple times a day, compared to 23% of Gen Z. They also report more positive impacts of their social media use, like their ability to express themselves and socialise with others.

On the other hand, Gen Z are more likely than older generations to use social media passively whilst also having more [negative feelings towards social media](#). "Passively scrolling can create



a “distorted reality” where one feels like they’re missing out,” Prihandito says. “FOMO can be especially intense for Gen Zs, who are still at a stage in life where peer acceptance and trying to fit in are key priorities in the stage of development they’re in”.

Over time, passively scrolling through social media is associated with [greater feelings of loneliness](#) as “it’s very rare that we look on social media and come away feeling better about ourselves when we spend lots of time mindlessly browsing and [comparing our lives to others](#)”, Sturmer says. Even though Gen Z might be just as “connected” as other generations online, this doesn’t mean they’re experiencing similar benefits if they’re using it to replace social interactions, not expand their social networks. As digital natives, there’s no rulebook on *how* to use it to maximise the benefits of social media and minimise the risk of using it to replace in real life [connections](#).

### **A Comfort Zone Catastrophe**

Liberty, Beth and Neve are the archetype of those reporting the [highest feelings of loneliness in the UK](#): single women, between the ages of 16-24, who are renting properties whilst living alone, with a mental health condition. Of course, that doesn’t mean that everyone who ticks these boxes feels lonely; nor that those whose lives don’t fit these criteria aren’t.

For socially anxious young adults, over-compensating through the “connectedness” of social media is a surefire way to stay safe within the lonely walls of their comfort zone. Take Beth, who has struggled to be interested in anything other than social media, like attending clubs or making the effort to regularly meet up with friends, “because I’ve spent that long on social media I’ve isolated myself from the actual world,” she says. She can’t work in the office full-time due to sensory difficulties. However, even on the one day during the week when she has to go into the office and see people for work, Beth is part of the [one-third of Gen Z](#) employees who admit to not socialising with their colleagues due to their social anxiety.

Or look at Neve, who feels unable to attend a simple Netball session in her local area because she’s terrified of meeting new people because she’s scared of being rejected. “I know I need to step out of my comfort zone and spend time interacting with actual people, but it just feels so difficult,” she says. Every time she mentally prepares herself to go, she ends up talking herself out of it and returning to the lonely act of sitting at home, alone and scrolling.

In Liberty’s life, regardless of how it was making her feel, she struggled to put her phone down for longer than a minute. “Every time I would look, someone else was accomplishing

something, or much prettier than me, and it'd make me feel so inadequate and alone," she says. "It got to the point where I just couldn't cope anymore, but I didn't want to stop scrolling because then I'd be left with my lonely thoughts and feelings of social imperfection".

These lonely women sit at home comparing their lives to others, scrolling passively through others' lives as they become [increasingly dissatisfied with their own](#). This ripples into how confident they feel to interrupt the addictive urge to scroll and sit with their lonely feelings. After all, confronting these uncomfortable feelings might prompt them to do something about it; something completely out of their comfort zone.

### **Deciding To "Show Up" For Life**

In 2022, Liberty felt so out of control over her urge to scroll, and the effect it was having on her mental health, that she deleted all social media apps except Reddit from her phone. This forced her to look up from her screen and pinpoint the parts of her life she was deeply unhappy with. A few weeks later, she decided to start a part-time Psychology degree with The Open University, after realising how much she wanted to draw upon her experience with mental health in a way that helps others overcome their struggles.

Going from using social media 24/7 to not at all felt extremely difficult, so Liberty used the Reddit app as a less gratifying substitute for Instagram. "Reddit's all text-based, there are no pictures, everyone's anonymous," she says. "If I wanted to see what someone else was up to, I'd go on Reddit, read a few posts from random people, then I'd get bored and log off the app. It'd still satisfy that urge to distract myself from my own life, but in a less toxic and lonely way", she says. "Because I deleted social media, I wasn't tracking everyone anymore. I didn't know what other people were up to," she says.

Once she started making changes, she couldn't stop. Liberty became aware of other areas of her life that she wasn't satisfied with. "I quit my job at O2 and started working as a Health Care Assistant in a local psychiatric unit to care for those with mental health issues alongside my degree", she says. "I worked there during the entire lockdown and met a lot of like-minded people and made loads of friends who were similar to me". Six months later, Liberty felt like her whole life had changed and decided she was ready to redownload the social media apps onto her phone. "I felt capable of going back on it because I'd made new friends and started a more fulfilling job. I felt like I was doing something with my life so don't feel the need to compare my life to others".

After feeling mentally paralyzed by the toll her social media addiction was taking on her life, Beth also had a light-bulb moment: “Something I’ve realised recently is that I was never actually lonely”, she says. “I just wasn’t using my time properly,” she says. “What’s been making me feel lonely is not using my time to do the things that I enjoy and making the most of my company and my alone time”.

With this newfound insight, the first thing Beth decided to do was switch up her morning routine. For years, she’d wake up five minutes before her alarm, not even get out of bed and reach for her phone to scroll before she started work. Now, Beth wakes up an hour or two before work around 5 or 6 am, goes to the gym or for a run. Or, if she doesn’t want to do either of those things, she’ll stand outside and get 5 or 10 minutes of fresh air, make herself a nice breakfast and read on her Kindle before starting work. She still uses social media regularly, but for solely active purposes, like posting on TikTok or responding to her Instagram DMs.

“I don’t feel lonely as I’m enjoying my own company. I’m no longer comparing my life to other peoples’ because I’ve learnt to accept that everyone’s in a different stage of their life,” she says. Beth’s whole perspective on her situation has changed; she’s even realised that she enjoys being single, living alone and having the time to spend doing the things she loves.

### **A Tap Away from a More Meaningful Life**

None of this is to say that you should quit your remote job or start working out before sunrise to combat feelings of loneliness or pull yourself away from social media. The message here is to start showing up for a meaningful life, offline, as much as possible. And ultimately, perseverance is key.

To create any form of meaningful change in your life, small or big, it’s important to build a reason “why”. Sturmer suggests Gen Z keep a “thought diary” for a week or so, documenting how their social media scrolls are making them feel. This involves noticing what content they’re looking at when feelings of loneliness arise, mapping out the thoughts that the content triggers, and how the feelings physically manifest in their body.

Just as Liberty noticed her friend’s travelling and getting degrees was making her feel like she was “behind in life”, and Neve felt FOMO when her friends were having fun at university – “by tracking what thoughts certain posts trigger when they scroll past them, how long they’re on the app for, why a piece of content has made them feel a certain way, they can provide themselves with personal evidence of why scrolling is not beneficial for them,” Sturmer notes.

“Once they’ve kept their thought diary, what they do with the information they’ve gained is entirely up to them,” she continues. Deleting social media and making big life decisions like starting a degree, as Liberty did, may feel too extreme. For many, Beth’s softer approach to setting boundaries around her social media usage may feel more attainable: creating space for activities you want to add to your life and small ways you can switch up your daily routine - like deciding to stand outside for 10 minutes when you wake up, instead of scrolling as soon as you open your eyes.

### **It's Not That Black and White**

There’s no one-fits-all approach to overcoming feelings of loneliness or creating healthier habits around social media. Fast forward to two months ago, alongside her full-time job as a Domestic Abuse Safety Officer, Liberty started a Mental Health Nursing degree at The University of Surrey. Even though she’s incomparably happier and more fulfilled than she was six years ago, her relationship with social media still isn’t “perfect”. Liberty still occasionally catches herself mindlessly scrolling through Instagram on a Sunday afternoon when she’s alone and feeling a bit lonely.

Even so, Liberty can have “blips” without being hard on herself. Instead, she offers herself a degree of tough love. “When I’m on Instagram, I actively tell myself that I’m only going to spend a set amount of time, usually five minutes, on the app; then I’ll switch to something else like Reddit if I’m bored and have nothing else to do,” Liberty says. She acknowledges her urge to scroll on social media will always be there, but she’s put boundaries in place to manage it. “Scrolling on social media doesn’t have control over me or my emotions anymore,” she says. “I feel free to live my life in a way that feels right for me”.

To get to a place where you can maintain firm boundaries, checking in with your social media usage regularly is the key to making sustainable changes that’ll work for you. Prihandito adds: “It’s about finding a balance where social media is a tool for connection and information. As Sturmer suggested with the thought diary, “mindfulness practices, such as journaling or meditation, can help Gen Z become more aware of their social media habits and the direct impact these have on their mental health and well-being”.

By adding [fulfilling activities into your life offline](#), the risk of content you’re scrolling past triggering feelings of comparison, low self-esteem, and loneliness will become less intense. “To counterbalance the impact of social media, it’s crucial for Gen Z to actively cultivate and

engage in offline experiences and relationships,” Prihandito says. “This may include finding new hobbies, joining community activities, and having face-to-face interactions that foster genuine connections and personal growth”.

You can even use social media to bridge the gap between your online and offline lives. Yes, you heard me. By joining [digital communities that encourage offline connection](#) between like-minded members of the community – like [These Girls Run](#) or [Gals Who Graduate](#) - social media can become a breeding ground to connect and meet new people. “I think it’s important to constantly remind ourselves of the value of offline human connection,” Sturmer says. “There’s a simple litmus test. After you’ve spent a lot of time online do you feel - better, or worse? And what about when you spend time out and about, speaking to real, live people?”.

Loneliness is challenged when you start living a life you value and enjoy. Through a few minor adjustments to her routine, Beth now fills the deep pockets of her day, where she would’ve previously been scrolling, with things she loves – like running, reading, cooking, and going to the gym. In doing so, her life has become more than just what she *has* to do to get through the day, plus social media. It’s become inundated with activities that align with her interests, needs and values. She doesn’t have time to scroll on social media because she’s living a life that lights her up. Spending time on her own is no longer a chore, but a choice.

Meanwhile, Liberty’s decision to go cold turkey enabled her to finally pause and look inward. She had the time to realise what she valued in life, away from all the noise and infinite activity. Soon after deleting the apps, Liberty realised that it wasn’t “behind in life” at all. Like Beth, she just wasn’t giving the time or energy to the things, people or activities that lit her up; that brought out the best in her. By deciding to take part in her real, colourful, and multi-faceted life, opportunities to make friends and network with like-minded people came her way.

Now, Liberty and Beth realise that it wasn’t social media that was the problem. The root of their loneliness was deeper than that. Sure, the addictive nature of the apps didn’t help; but, ultimately, their feelings of loneliness eased when they bravely held a mirror up to the parts of their offline lives that lacked attention. They non-judgementally faced up to the fact that: although social media made *them* feel lonely, in that specific period of *their* life, it isn’t inherently bad. By taking a step back, and placing the power back into their hands, Liberty and Beth don’t feel trapped by their social media usage anymore, they feel free.

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