

By Jeff “Chief” Urbaniak  
COLUMNIST (www.AdviceChief.com)

Are you someone who doesn't feel comfortable being alone? Have you grown accustomed to chaos, incessant noise, and constant activity? Are you sometimes terrified to be alone with your thoughts because you fear you may think about things that could cause you to feel uncomfortable? Perhaps you may remember something sad or you start worrying about the future. So in an attempt to keep your uncomfortable emotions at bay, you keep your mind as busy as possible. Is this you?

Being alone often gets confused with being lonely, but they're not the same thing. Feelings of loneliness have been linked to poor sleep, high blood pressure, weaker immune systems, and increased stress hormones. But being alone doesn't necessarily cause loneliness. In fact, some people still feel lonely when they're in a crowded room with other people. Loneliness is about perceiving that no one is there for you. But solitude is about making a choice to be alone with your thoughts.

There were times earlier in my life when I fell into the activity trap because I didn't like being alone--or should I say I had not yet learned the value of alone time. I would fill my days with constant activity to deny myself solitude. All of this activity would prevent my brain from shutting off at night. I experienced racing thoughts, and the harder I tried to drown them out, the more they would race, creating a perpetuating cycle. Before I knew it, I'd only have three hours left before my alarm would sound...then two hours...then one hour. Have you experienced this same kind of nighttime ordeal?

Constantly tending to our daily responsibilities and relationships can take a toll on us if we don't occasionally stop and take time to renew ourselves in solitude. Unfortunately, the benefits of solitude are often ignored or minimized. Here's what the research says are some of the major benefits of alone time:

*\* Moderate alone time is good for kids.* A 1997 study called “The Emergence of Solitude as a Constructive Domain of Experience in Early Adolescence” found that 5th to 9th graders who spent moderate amounts of time alone were less likely to exhibit behavioral problems. They also scored lower on depression rating scales and had higher grade point averages.

*\* Solitude at the office can increase productivity.* Although many office settings promote open work spaces and large brainstorming sessions, a study in 2000 called “Cognitive Stimulation in Brainstorming” found that most people in the study performed better when they had some privacy. Spending some time away from everyone has been linked to increased productivity.

*\* Alone time may increase your empathy.* When people spend time by themselves, they're more likely to show compassion for others. If you're spending a lot of time with your social circle, you're more likely to develop a “we vs. them” mentality, which can cause you to behave less compassionately toward those outside your social circle.

*\* Spending some time alone can spark creativity.* Many successful artists, writers, and musicians credit solitude with improving their performance, and some research suggests that spending time away from the demands of society can boost creativity.

*\* Solitary skills are good for mental health.* Although there's often a lot of emphasis on the importance of social skills, evidence suggests solitary skills may be equally important for health and well-being. The ability to tolerate alone time has been linked to increased happiness, life satisfaction, and improved stress management. People who enjoy alone time also experience less depression.

*\* Solitude offers restoration.* Alone time provides an opportunity to recharge your batteries. Research shows that spending time alone in nature offers rest and renewal.

We live in a world where we can be constantly connected to people by digital means. But digital connectivity means we have fewer opportunities to be alone with our thoughts. Reaching for our phone to check messages, scrolling through social media accounts, and reading online news stories can take up a lot of our time. Just spending a few minutes here and few minutes there can add up to several hours a day. Constant communication interrupts our daily activities and can lead to increased stress and anxiety. Take a break from technology and incorporate some quiet time in your daily life by trying the following:

1) Turn off the TV when you're actually not watching it.

2) Ride in the car without the radio playing.

3) Go for a walk and ignore your cell phone, or if you feel safe, don't take your cell phone at all.

4) Shut off all your electronics once in a while just to take a break.

The key to making alone time helpful is that it has to be a choice. Schedule a date with yourself--a date that allows you to be alone with your thoughts. Maybe it's a day, maybe it's a week.

While fishing in a boat in the middle of a lake may offer one person a peaceful and rejuvenating experience, many other people would find the exercise to be dreadful. If you despise something, you aren't likely to keep it up long term. It's best to find some solitary activities that you enjoy so you can work them into your routine.

If you appreciate nature, consider spending time in the woods. If you love a good meal, go to a restaurant of your choice. You don't have to stay home to appreciate solitude. Instead, choose to do something that you may not normally do when you're with people. Just make sure you don't bury your nose in a book or spend time text messaging someone. The point of a date with yourself is to be alone with your thoughts. Try it!

~ The End ~