

Me, Myself & I

In a world where you can swipe right to get a date, click “add” to make a friend, and FOMO is rife, the art of solitude is making a resurgence—and embracing it could be the key to getting everything you’ve ever wanted. *By Yi-Hwa Hanna*

It's a Friday night and you're spending a well-earned quiet night in. But 20 minutes after the next episode of *House of Cards* starts, you start feeling a little antsy. You reach for your phone. Scroll through the 'gram. Maybe even post an Instagram Story about your #JOMO (that's Joy Of Missing Out, in case you didn't know). But is your alone time really alone if you're spending it still glued to your social media—your lifeboat to the outside world—and more importantly, are you actually reaping the benefits of your quality time with yours truly?

According to psychologists, being alone can boost your creativity—research has shown that people who work alone then come together to share ideas are often more prolific than those who brainstorm in groups—not to mention more energetic and happier, with a clearer mindset. It makes sense. Much like the effects of meditation, spending time alone—and doing so legitimately without seeking company via your phone or WiFi connection—forces us to be more mindful, allowing you the opportunity to think more deeply, and listen to and understand yourself better.

“Psychologically, spending time alone allows you to literally disconnect from what's going on around you and then ‘recharge’ your batteries as such. This, in turn, gives you



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more mental headspace, so you can work through problems more effectively. We're very quick to charge our devices on a daily basis, but when was the last time you allowed yourself to 'power off' and recharge?" says Life Coach and *WHME* Advisory Board Member, Linda Bonnar. "Also, psychologically speaking, spending time alone encourages self-reflection—something I constantly encourage my clients to do; becoming aware of our own thinking errors happens best when we have that time to ourselves, and it's only when we recognise and accept that

something is happening that we can begin to change it, such as identifying that you have a tendency to mind-read situations, or have unrealistic expectations, for instance," Linda continues, adding: "Emotionally, spending time on our own and having this greater element of headspace encourages us to learn to understand ourselves better too. And this is important because when we understand ourselves better, our sense of empathy improves, and this can only enhance our relationships, be they professional or personal. I also feel that we

become more in control of emotions when we spend more time alone, because it can help us recognise triggers to feeling a particular way."

In our modern have-it-now culture of instant gratification, we seem to now be constantly switched on and available to all those around us. Can't reach someone in person or on the phone? Send them a message or write on their wall on Facebook, drop them an Instagram or Snapchat message, or whatever social media messenger you may be into at the time. While the days of carrier pigeon—wherein



people seemed to seek out company more actively than the alternative—are long gone and replaced with a barrage of means of communication from every angle, intentional bouts of committed solitude seem to be the antidote to our fast-paced contemporary world. And we mean actual alone time: “Time alone should ideally incorporate quality alone time. So not scurrying around tidying, sleeping, or watching television, but really stopping to appreciate that moment through hobbies or self-care, for example,” says Melanie

Schlatter, a Psychologist and *WHME* Advisory Board Member. “Learning to be truly present also allows you to healthily detach from current matters and become more of an observer, which enables a healthy consciousness of everything that is happening around you—you are less likely to succumb to the ego and behave in ways you might be disappointed in later. If you are more calm and balanced, this also enables a much greater ability to focus on things that are important in life, versus getting caught up in unnecessary details or past or future worry—it can be like a mini-recalibration. People who can look inwards as well as learn to stop and be comfortable in their own company are generally less affected by external influences, which is beneficial in self-growth and development, and the attainment of goals,” Melanie adds.

Switching Off

So how do we achieve this quality alone time? Learning how to resist the lure of the blue screen is one thing—and psychologically, it’s a good release from the addiction of perpetual likes and comments that can have a damaging effect on our confidence and self-esteem, to boot. In 2013, researchers from India found that frequent or compulsive internet users exhibit the same signs as those facing a drug addiction, claiming that with each “Like” or comment, our brain releases the same dopamine hit we’d get from certain drugs, while German scientists have linked positive social feedback channeled through platforms like Facebook to a boost in the brain’s nucleus accumbens, our cerebral reward centre. With each “hit,” we subconsciously gain chemical releases from certain actions that lead us to continually seek more of it, in order to get our next fix. It’s no wonder it’s so increasingly

difficult to switch off from it and learn how to actually spend time alone, with our own voices and thoughts to explore for company rather than those of fellow keyboard junkies all over the world, available at pretty much any time, all the time, no matter when it is you’re craving it. “With the advent of social media and technology, as well as leading generally hectic lives, many people are losing the ability to even know *how* to spend time alone,” Melanie says. “It’s uncomfortable. They don’t know what to do without the stimulation. Being on social media is not always bad, but it’s about how long, how often, and why you are on it. If you spend a portion of time alone and ‘parked’ where you can also obtain a sense of calm, then that can pay dividends for your sense of self and ability to cope with day-to-day life in the future,” Melanie adds. Linda explains the phenomenon a little further, saying: “You can be physically alone but want to, or feel the need to, create connections with others, and that’s very different.”

You might be wondering how we got here. Sure, it has an addictive nature, but not all of us have caved to that, right? As it turns out, there are so many reasons one could seek solace in the comfort and easy accessibility of having company—albeit virtual—just a click away that it’s easy to see why it’s so tempting. “There might be a level of social anxiety (‘What would people think if they saw me?’); there could be issues that they simply don’t want to face (sometimes it’s easier to keep busy than face troubles in the home), they don’t like the silence and what that brings up in their mind; or they may not know how to truly enjoy those moments alone. For instance, people from larger families are nearly always surrounded by people; so it’s not that they are afraid of being alone, per se—it just feels weird to them! Extroverted people might not even see the



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Life and Love

point—why on earth would you go to dinner alone when you get your energy from being with people?” Melanie explains. From Linda’s experience as a Life Coach, the most common reason she sees for people being afraid to spend time alone is indeed that fear of being alone with their own thoughts. “Remember that your thoughts are your powerhouse; they are so powerful that they control your feelings, actions and behaviours. Learning to control your thoughts can be a daunting task in itself because it first means we have to face them, and for some people, this process might just seem too upsetting. When we’re busy, our heads are usually full so we don’t have that headspace to think about the other things, like our thoughts, and so we don’t have to deal with them—bingo! People are also often afraid to spend time alone because of what others will think of them and that judgment they cannot control. Think about it, when was the last time you saw someone having dinner alone? And I don’t mean with their laptop in a WiFi area! What were your initial thoughts?” Linda says.

Table For One, Please

Once you’ve committed yourself to the mindset of wanting to spend more quality time with yourself, how do you go about doing that? First, figure out why you’ve struggled to do so in the past. “Learning how to spend time on your own is like learning anything—you take it step by step and use the feedback that goes with it. If this is something you’re having trouble figuring out on your own, then talk to a friend, invest in a coach, or if you’re worried that it’s something deeper, speak to a medical professional. If this block is something that reduces your quality of life or the choices you have available to you, then do yourself the favour and deal with it,” Linda advises.



“Working backwards from your goal is a great place to start; you’re literally reverse engineering until you get to that foundation step that’s manageable yet challenging. Your first step might not be about going to the mall for coffee, but going to the park to read or do some writing to learn to be alone and ok with your thoughts. And when you’ve taken that first step a few times, make time to reflect and ask

yourself what you got from the experience. What did it do for you? Notice your progress and even reward yourself as you move up your ladder to goal-achievement, because all these practices will help you to enjoy it more,” Linda says, likening it to when you start exercising or begin with a new training programme: “They know it’s good for them, they know it will benefit them in many ways, but they need those

results or that proof instantaneously! Persevere with your mini-tasks and look for those benefits (because they might not be completely obvious the first time around) if this is a habit you want to maintain, because we all know what happens when we feel we ‘have to’ or ‘should’ do something—our head quickly fills up with all the excuses imaginable or reasons why we shouldn’t do it. And trust me, as





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a Life Coach, I've heard them all!" Linda says.

Making small changes to your schedule to allow for your alone time, just as you would with any other newly-found commitment, is another great place to start, according to Melanie. "Get up a little earlier to read or exercise, or take yourself away to walk for a few minutes at lunchtime or before you get home at night. I've known people who would do a few breathing exercises in the car in the driveway before they enter the house, or at bedtime. They might sit, reflect, or even jot down a few notes on how the day panned out. Get help and delegate (so you can actually have some time), and set boundaries on what you need where possible—for instance, teach the kids that Mum has 15 minutes for unwinding before she gives

them her full attention," Melanie says. And this type of mindset could help you find focus in other aspects of your life, be it saving money, advancing in your career, learning to be more secure in yourself and more self-aware—and in turn, helping to improve the quality of relationships you have with other people, be it romantic or otherwise—and even helping you to maintain more calmness on a daily basis. "People who spend time alone for the sake of it are already aware that they are simply ticking a box. The key is in the feeling. I always start with breathing exercises and senses exercises to get them attuned to slowing right down and 'stopping' and then I get them to notice what comes up for them. People often need to get used to the busy voice that says, 'you need to do this, go there,

you forgot that, this is stupid,' and so forth, or the discomfort in their gut and just step into the observer mode. When people can learn to keep calm and keep doing something in the name of productive goals or values, even though their mind is chatting away, then they are onto something worthwhile," Melanie explains.

Take Yourself On A Date

In a way, learning how to spend time on your own, and for the real value of doing so, is simply about being kind to yourself, and allowing yourself the same attention and courtesy that you would with other people that you care about. Try taking yourself to the movies, or going out to dinner. Go to your favourite cafe, and even if you must bring your laptop or a book with you, remember to take a little time to people-

watch, or at least put your work or entertainment to one side while you are actually in the process of eating. If you're struggling with being able to mentally switch off or be in your own head while you are alone, try meditation—apps like Headspace are great tools for teaching yourself how to do that at a time that is convenient to you and your schedule, with options to work it in somehow be it for just 10 minutes a day or a full hour or more; whatever you can manage.

Once you have mastered the art of actually learning to enjoy spending time in your own company, it's equally important to not let yourself become isolated since, ultimately, humans are social creatures, and we require a healthy balance of alone time as well as time with friends, family and loved ones—they key is in learning how to spend all of that time valuably. "Being connected to others and having a few key relationships is paramount to quality of life, especially as one gets older. Having people you can talk to, laugh with, do things with, learn from, and rely upon always has positive ramifications for psychological, even physical health," Melanie says. By distinguishing those that enrich us and add positive values to our lives, we are able to remove those that do not—and better allocate that time to ourselves—and then, when you are in social situations, surrounding yourself with people who you choose to and are quality, meaningful relationships. "When we surround ourselves with optimistic and fun people, we naturally feel better; it's contagious! Think about someone who you enjoy spending time with, and I bet you'll start smiling instantly," Linda says, adding: "Social relationships can increase our self-esteem, enhance our level of empathy, and teach us more about ourselves too." And if those relationships include the one you have with yourself? Then you're onto something. ■