

Is it good to spend time alone?

Background

Human beings are social creatures (Sussman, [2017](#)) – meaning we not only thrive in the presence of others, but depend on social connections for our health, wellbeing, and survival (Ingold, [1991](#); Baumeister & Leary, [1995](#); Allen et al., [2022](#); Ebstein et al., [2010](#)). Yet, we inevitably spend significant amounts of time alone. Indeed, estimates suggest that, on average, 40% of our waking hours are spent by ourselves (Larson, [1985](#); Anttila et al., [2020](#)). Moreover, research suggests that the amount of time we spend alone on a daily basis is increasing (Anttila et al., [2020](#)). Given that loneliness and social isolation are widely documented to be harmful to our health (Wang et al., [2023](#)), these figures raise questions about the potential effects of spending time alone.

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to synthesize research on our “alone-time”. In doing so, we describe time spent alone as “solitude,” which is formally understood as the state of being alone, irrespective of the positive or negative connotations associated therewith. In using this term, we recognize that individuals can achieve a state of cognitive solitude while physically close, but mentally distanced from others (Weinstein et al., [2022](#)). However, for the purposes of this brief, we primarily focus on time spent physically by one’s self.

Evidence from Existing Studies

The Effects of Solitude on Wellbeing

As noted above, social connection and time spent with others promotes health, happiness, and wellness (Lang et al., [1997](#)). As such, it is unsurprising that studies generally find that time spent alone is characterized by low affect, unpleasant emotions, and psychological stress (Larson et al., [1985](#); Matias et al., [2011](#)). Even simply preferring more time alone is associated with an array of negative health outcomes, including depression, suicidal ideation and risk for self-harm (Endo et al., [2017](#)). For example, in a study by Gazelle et al. ([2010](#)) children identified as demonstrating solitary behaviours in the 3rd or 4th grade, were more likely to be diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, dysthymia, and major depression. Furthermore, other measures of asocial behaviour, such as social anhedonia (i.e., disinterest in socializing), are likewise linked with averse outcomes (Silvia & Kwapil, [2011](#); Jiang et al., [2022](#)). Given these negative associations, it is not surprising that spending time alone has come to be stigmatized by society (Ren & Stavrova et al., [2023](#)).

Despite the widely held beliefs that alone time is bad (Ost-Mor et al., [2021](#); Ren & Evans, [2021](#)), some people actually enjoy being alone (Rokach & Chan, [2021](#)). Furthermore, studies on solitude have linked it with a wide variety of positive outcomes, including increased freedom, opportunity for intimacy, creativity, introspection, growth, spirituality, and escape from the

pressures of life (Chen & Liu, [2022](#); Naor & Mayseless, [2020](#); Weinstein et al., [2021](#); Long & Avriil, [2003](#)). Take for instance seniors who live alone: Rather than languishing, Chai & Margolis ([2020](#)) demonstrate that seniors who live by themselves spend more time communicating with others, are no more likely to feel socially unfulfilled, and even report feeling much less rushed and stressed about how their time is spent. In other words, being alone is not the same as being lonely (Queen et al., [2014](#)).

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that solitude is more than simply an enjoyable activity. Indeed, our evolving understanding of solitude suggests that it is an adaptive strategy that serves critical psychological and social functions. One such function is as a means of regulating our emotional state and building reserves of social energy that we can call on when needed. Supporting this view, studies have observed that solitary behavior is not only more likely after intensive periods of socialization (Hu et al., [2022](#); Hall et al., [2023](#)), but that the more time we spend socializing, the more time we spend recovering in solitude thereafter (Luo et al., [2022](#))

Another key function of solitude is its role in managing our social relationships – particularly when things are not going well. Indeed, not all social interactions are necessarily positive or rewarding. Some social connections are outright harmful. Research suggests that we manage these aversive social relationships and situations by seeing solitude (Ren et al., [2021](#); Morneau-Vaillancourt et al., [2021](#)). Similarly, we opt to spend time alone, in privacy, in order to avoid social stigma and judgment about our behavior – as is the case for people who use illicit substances alone (Rosen et al., [2023](#)). In other times, we withdraw from social situations after being rejected or ostracized. Supporting this motive, preferences for solitude appear to be correlated with lower self-evaluation (Yang et al., [2020](#)) – when we feel bad about ourselves, we avoid getting kicked while we’re already down. Taken together these findings underscore the reality that solitude is an adaptive and functional social response that can help individuals manage their sense of self, avoid unpleasant social appraisal, or recover from challenging or depleting social situations (Lay et al., [2020](#); Birditt et al., [2019](#); Peter & Gazelle, [2017](#); Gazelle, [2010](#)).

The evidence summarized above presents conflicting views on the effects of solitude. To reconcile these, it is important to contextualize these experiences in the broader social context of one’s life. Indeed, a growing number of studies highlight the overall quality of one’s social life as an important determinant of whether time spent alone is aversive or beneficial (Pauly et al., [2018](#); Djundeva et al., [2019](#); Fang et al., [2022](#); Pavlidis et al., [2022](#)). These studies show that people with greater levels of social support fair better when they are alone. In other words, spending time alone appears to be okay, as long as one does not spend too much time alone. Exemplifying this principle, Larson ([1990](#)) randomly sampled adolescents throughout their day and demonstrated that while time alone was often characterized by loneliness and passivity, youth were actually most well-adjusted when they spent at least a moderate amount of their overall time alone (~30% of waking time; Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, [1978](#)). This suggests that in the moment, time alone may very well feel unpleasant, though in moderate doses its global effect on one’s life can be positive (Lay et al., [2020](#)). Overall, these studies highlight the importance of understanding time alone within the broader context of our social lives.

Individual Differences in the Effects of Solitude

In addition to being contingent on the overall quality of one's social life, the effects of solitude also differ according to individual differences (Smith et al., [2023](#)). Chief among these characteristics is whether people are free to choose how much time they spend alone (Larson, [1985](#); Lay et al., [2018](#); Anttila et al., [2020](#); Nguyen et al., [2022](#); Huang et al., [2023](#); Delelis, [2023](#)). This autonomy and control is what differentiates "solitude" (i.e., voluntary time spent alone) from "isolation" (i.e., the involuntary time spent alone; Deci & Ryan, [1985](#); Cloutier-Fisher & Kobayashi, [2009](#); Hawkley & Cacioppo, [2010](#); Cloutier-Fisher & Kobayashi, [2009](#); Long & Averill, [2003](#)). This distinction is important because, according to self-determination theory, our ability to choose and self-determine is central to how we understand our experiences (Ryan & Deci, [2000](#); Nguyen et al., [2022](#)). Empirically, this is supported, with a variety of studies emphasizing that our motives for solitude and the situations that give rise to solitude experiences are key moderators of whether that time alone is positive or negative (Liu et al., [2023](#); Zhou et al., [2023](#); Borg & Willoughby, [2022](#); Thomas & Azmitia, [2018](#)).

Beyond the immediate context of how we spend our time and whether in a given moment we want to be alone, individuals also vary on a global level with respect to how much alone time they prefer (Silvia & Kwapil, [2011](#)). Individual differences in preferences for solitude have long been shown to moderate the effect of alone time on wellbeing (Burger, [1995](#); Lay et al., [2018](#)). These differences extend beyond our momentary whims and capture a broader disposition towards social behavior that begins developing in early childhood (Atzil et al., [2018](#); Chen et al., [2023](#); Zheng et al., [2023](#); Gazelle & Cui, [2021](#); Mehus et al., [2023](#)). The development of these preferences arises from our unique social and situational contexts over the course of many formative experiences. As such, demographic and cultural factors that shape these experiences can influence our social development. For example, studies highlight differences in the amount of time that people spend alone according to their gender, ethnicity, and a wide variety of other characteristics (Smith, [1997](#); Chen & Liu, [2022](#)). For example Drotning ([2020](#)) found that in the United States, Black men spent the most time alone and Hispanic women spent the least time alone – highlighting important gender and cultural differences.

Given the process of social development, it is unclear the extent to which we modify our social preferences. Indeed, these preferences are deeply intertwined with other person-level characteristics, including shyness, introversion-extraversion, attachment style, social anxiety, social phobia, social anhedonia, and a range of other traits, psychological outcomes, and behaviours (Petric, [2022](#); Grant, [2013](#); Hall et al., [2023](#); Crozier, [1979](#); Kong et al., [2023](#); Tang et al., [2016](#); Orr & Castle, [1998](#)). Furthermore, evidence suggests that motivations for social connection are fundamentally connected to differences in reward processing (Olson et al., [2021](#); Smillie, [2013](#); Yang et al., [2018](#)), meaning that negative correlations between asocial behaviours and wellbeing might be explained by underlying biological or psychological functions within individuals (Enneking et al., [2019](#)). Compounding the situation, the reduced reward from social stimuli might also project disinterest, leading to poorer quality relationships and social interactions (Llerena et al., [2012](#)) – thereby reinforcing the social, psychological, and even biological processes that shape one's social cognition and behaviour. Take for instance research by White et al. ([2022](#)), who investigated the relationship between time spent alone, socializing, and affect among young adults over a period of seven days. They found that social interactions after an unusually lengthy period of time alone were more rewarding – but shy and avoidant individuals actually felt more anxious.

Another important source for individual variation with respect to the impacts of solitude on wellbeing is age. Indeed, multiple studies suggest that the negative euphoria associated with being alone is particularly strong for youth. Meanwhile, older adults experience less negative emotions when alone (Borg & Willoughby et al., [2022](#); Nikitin et al., [2022](#); Weinstein et al., [2021](#); Pauly et al., [2016](#); Larson, [1990](#)). These findings underscore that the meaning and significance of time spent alone varies over the life course and between individuals.

Taken together, this evidence highlights the importance of respecting individual differences to social and solitary experiences (Barstead et al., [2018](#)). Indeed, it is clear that the impact of solitude on well-being is multifaceted, contingent on individual choice and the broader context of one's life. Personal preferences, stemming from early childhood and shaped by factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, and personality play a significant role. Recognizing these relationships is essential for understanding the effect and function of solitude in our lives.

Maximizing the Benefits of Time Spent Alone

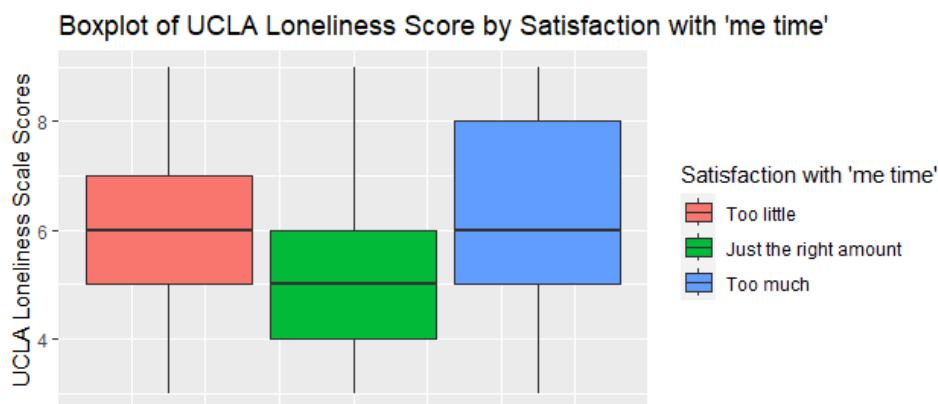
As noted at the outset of this brief, all of us will inevitably spend time alone. Unfortunately, this time can be unpleasant and boring, particularly if we have not chosen it (Weinstein, [2021](#)). Nevertheless, as we've noted solitude can also be beneficial, providing opportunities for self-expansion and fulfillment (Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, [2014](#); Lay et al., [2019](#); Chen & Liu, [2022](#); Pauly et al., [2016](#)). As such, it is important for us to not treat time with others and time alone as mutually exclusive. Leary et al. ([2003](#)) demonstrated that the amount of time we spend alone and the extent that we enjoy this time is less strongly correlated with low social interest than it is with interest in getting some time for ourselves. In other words, we can enjoy both.

As such, it may be beneficial for many of us to cognitively-reframe time spent alone as a positive (rather than a negative) experience (Larson & Lee, [1995](#); Rodriguez et al., [2020](#)). This can be done by thinking of time spent alone as a valued and legitimate choice (Nguyen et al., [2022](#)). Negative emotions associated with time alone can be avoided by not only resolving the stigma associated with solitude (Pasanen, [2021](#); Lang & Baltes, [1997](#)), but also by ensuring that time spent alone is used in productive and meaningful ways (Pauly et al., [2022](#); Coplan et al., [2021](#); Stanley et al., [2016](#)). This might mean opting for solitary experiences that are rejuvenating, while also limiting time spent on less productive activities, such as passive media consumption (O'Day & Heimberg, [2021](#); Leckfor et al., [2023](#); Coplan et al., [2022](#)). For example, given that alone time is associated with heightened states of arousal, solitude can provide a spring board for motivating, planning, or preparing for future social connections (Larson et al., [1985](#)). That said, perhaps of greatest importance, it is critical to not get caught up in the inertia of being alone (Elmer et al., [2020](#); Toyoshima & Kisumi et al., [2021](#)). Indeed, research studies have shown that increased amounts of time alone can prime individuals to perceive social threats – leading to increased social vigilance and anxiety and lower valuations of social situations (Cacioppo et al., [2015](#); Hawkey & Cacioppo, [2010](#), [2011](#)). Indeed, the emerging consensus from the literature on the effects of alone time are that while at least some is good, too much is bad, and the appropriate balance between time spent alone and time spent with others differs from person to person (Ren et al., [2023](#); Elmer et al., [2020](#); Stanley et al., [2016](#); Chen & Liu, [2022](#)).

Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

In the 2021 Canadian Social Connection Survey, we asked 2,264 participants to rate whether they spent too much, too little, or just the right amount of time (1) sleeping, (2) working, (3) hanging out with friends, (4) spending time with family, (5) getting “me” time, (6) winding down, (7) exercising, (8) reading news or social media, (9) sitting and thinking about things important to them, (10) talking about important things with others, (11) talking with someone who really understands them, (12) practicing hobbies and skills, and (13) helping others and volunteering. Using participant’s responses to these questions, we calculated the standardized general dominance for each measure to evaluate its importance in predicting UCLA 3-item loneliness scores. Results from these analyses suggested that approximately one-fourth (25.5%) of the variation in loneliness scores were attributed to participant’s subjective evaluations about whether they were spending too much, too little, or just the right amount of time on these activities. Our analyses also revealed that both time spent conversing with others and “me time” emerged as key predictors of loneliness. Indeed, we found that satisfaction with the amount of time spent talking with a confidant who really understood them was the most dominant time-use satisfaction variable in predicting loneliness scores, with a standardized score of 0.23. This suggests that feeling understood had the strongest association with feelings of loneliness among the factors considered. Following closely was the amount of time spent talking about important things with others (0.16). Next, getting enough “me time”, perhaps the best approximation of solitude, ranked as third, with a value of 0.12, implying its notable but lesser influence compared with the social connection measures. Subsequently, satisfaction with time spent working and sleeping came in with standardized general dominance scores of 0.08 and 0.07, respectively. Next, we find that satisfaction with time spent hanging out, with family, winding down, and thinking had moderate associations with loneliness, all with scores around 0.05. Satisfaction with time spent engaging in hobbies, helping others, exercising, and media consumption had the least sway over feelings of loneliness, each with scores below 0.05. Overall, these findings underscore the pivotal roles of interpersonal understanding and communication in determining feelings of loneliness, but also the relative importance of solitude.

We also examined UCLA loneliness scores across participant’s responses focused on their satisfaction with the amount of “me time” they were getting.



These results showed that loneliness scores were higher for both those who got too much or too little “me time.” Post-hoc pairwise comparisons (i.e., Tukey’s Honestly Significant Different

Test) confirmed that participants who felt their "me time" was "just the right amount" reported significantly lower UCLA Loneliness Scale scores (M difference = -0.642, $p < .001$) compared to those feeling they had "too little" me time. In contrast, those indicating "too much" me time scored significantly higher, both compared to those who reported getting "too little" (M difference = 0.515, $p < .001$) and "just the right amount" (M difference = 1.157, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The evidence summarized above indicates there are considerable benefits of solitude and that it is important to our social lives. However, there is also considerable danger in getting too much solitude. Furthermore, autonomy and choice appear to be central to the effect of solitude on an individual. Indeed, when individuals exercise autonomy in their solitary states, solitude often functions as a positive force, facilitating introspection and creativity. However, imposed solitude, or social isolation, can lead to adverse psychological outcomes. Related to this concept is the equally salient role of individual differences in preferences for solitude – which make it difficult to quantify how much solitude someone should get.

Given the potential benefits of solitude and the large extent to which stable person-level traits and situational factors shape experiences of solitude, it is important to address the negative stigma associated with alone time and improve people's understanding of how they can leverage their time alone for personal fulfillment and benefit.

Finally, while solitude has been researched for decades, it is important to recognize that empirical studies continue to be challenged by inconsistent measurement and inappropriate controls (McVarnock et al., [2023](#); Brook & Willoughby, [2019](#)). For example, time spent in the presence of others is very different for an elderly person receiving round-the-clock attention from a care giver than it is for someone who finds some time to themselves to enjoy a quiet read in the bathtub (Lang & Baltes, [1997](#)). Appropriate assessments of the effect of solitude likely require longitudinal studies that measure not only time spent alone, but the motives, preferences, and situational and contextual factors that shape these experiences. Continued research is therefore important to our evolving understanding of the risks and rewards of solitude.

Conclusion

Based on the available evidence, we recommend that individuals actively consider their preferences for solitude, explore ways that they can get the most out of their time alone, and strive to improve the broader social situation to reduce the negative effects of alone time. Furthermore, communities, organizations, and the broader society should work together to create supportive environments that respect and value both solitary and social experiences. This includes providing resources and education on the benefits of healthy solitude, ensuring that those who seek alone time can do so without stigma, and setting up systems to help those who may feel isolated or lonely. By promoting a balanced understanding of solitude, we can build stronger, more connected communities that cater to the diverse needs of all individuals.

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