

SOLITUDE

The average adult spends nearly one-third of their waking life alone. How do we overcome the stigma of solitude and find strength in going it alone? Whether we love it or try to avoid it, we can make better use of that time. The science of solitude shows that alone time can be a powerful space used to tap into countless benefits. Translating key research findings into actionable facts and advice, this book shows that alone time can boost well-being. From relaxation and recharging to problem solving and emotion regulation, solitude can benefit personal growth, contentment, creativity, and our relationships with ourselves and others. Learning what makes us better at spending time alone can help us move toward our best possible selves.

Netta Weinstein is an internationally recognized psychologist and director of the European Research Council’s “Solitude: Alone but Resilient” (SOAR) project. Her research focuses on motivation and well-being. She is also Professor of Psychology at the University of Reading and an associate researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, UK.

Heather Hansen is an independent science writer and author. She joined SOAR in 2020 to lend her expertise in interviewing and communication. She has won awards from the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Society of American Travel Writers, and the Colorado Authors League.

Thuy-vy T. Nguyen is a pioneer and expert in studying solitude in laboratory experiments and investigating the factors that lead to different concepts of solitude. She is also Associate Professor in Psychology at Durham University, a fellow at Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Well-being, and principal investigator of the Solitude Lab at Durham University, UK.

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The Science and Power of Alone Time

Netta Weinstein
Heather Hansen
Thuy-vy T. Nguyen



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Netta Weinstein, Heather Hansen, Thuy-vy T. Nguyen
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477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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Note to the Reader

Unlike its mythologies, which you'll read about throughout this book, the science of solitude is very new, and insights are emerging every day about its values and costs. We are learning a lot about the topic by studying everyday solitude both in artificial laboratory environments and by talking with people whose stories can enlighten researchers about how time alone impacts their lives.

That said, it's tough to study solitude in real time, because by its very definition, people can't be alone and talking to researchers! And that begs certain questions – can we assess real (meaningful) solitude in a lab where participants don't create, or even know, their space? When we ask research subjects about past episodes of solitude, are they able to accurately report what that time felt like? In general, solitude has proven harder to study than other human phenomena, but it's intriguing enough to be worth the effort. With an understanding of these potential limitations, we have to make suppositions in our work about solitude as many people experience it.

Because of who we and other researchers have focused on in our inquiries, we also know more about certain groups of people. Psychologists across different fields of interest including solitude often study college students because they happen to have them around. This isn't a great solution to the problem of demographic diversity in research in general, and we have to keep in mind that a college student's relationship with time alone is unique to that time in their lives and to the socioeconomic conditions that have placed them there. Thanks to the work of other researchers who have focused instead on older adults (who have had more time to build relationships with solitude), there are also

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some good data on that age group. Similarly, alone time and children also has been well studied. That's an important topic that we touch upon in these pages, but because this is a book about adults, we do not give it full treatment. By contrast, there is much less research than we'd like on people inhabiting the major gap between young and old. Much of the research that we've done over the past several years, which we talk about throughout these chapters, aims to begin filling that void. In the same breath, we acknowledge that there is much more work still to be done.

Another limitation that we want to make readers aware of is that researchers have largely studied the solitude experiences of people in Western countries. When appropriate, we try to extrapolate what those data may mean from a broader cultural perspective, and we make every effort to give voice to those ideas and studies that have come from underrepresented places. In our own work, we have also tried to recruit study participants from as many relevant demographic groups as possible. Again, we recognize that even that approach will leave certain voices unheard for the time being, and we can only endeavor to be more thorough going forward.

Because the study of positive solitude is, in many ways, “straight out of the oven” (as Netta describes it), we also have to acknowledge that ideas and findings about it exist at various stages of development. Although most of the scientific knowledge we present in this book has been peer reviewed, there is also fresh information gained from new data that have not yet been published (at least at the moment of this book's publication). In those cases, we share that learning along with data and materials in an effort to be fully transparent. We have carefully analyzed those data before sharing them in this book, but we welcome readers to consider the merits of those ideas and are open to differing perspectives.

Some of our recent research includes a substantive narrative study that we draw upon heavily in these chapters. Those include lengthy conversations with dozens of people around the world from fairly diverse demographics about their experiences of solitude. Many of those participants are precisely quoted in the text to honor the depth and context of their contributions. Although their words are exact, we have endeavored to protect their privacy by changing their names – using only first names – and avoiding the use of any information that could precisely identify them. In all cases, their ages and countries of origin have been maintained.