

Features

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The important gifts we gain in solitude

As life moves forward faster and faster, it becomes more important than ever that we learn ways to maintain balance, cope with the resulting pressures and know that we are directing our own lives. Otherwise, we feel overloaded, overreact to minor annoyances and feel like we can never catch up. We watch ourselves becoming slaves to our pagers, computers, voice messages and cell phones. And sometimes the pressures block our ability to have meaningful relationships, to be creative and to have peace of mind.

Many experts think the source of our inner turmoil in this age of alienation is our lack of solitude. Studies have found that solitude actually allows us to connect to others in a very rich way, and that meaningful alone time is a powerful need in today's world. But there is an important distinction between solitude and loneliness. They may look alike because both are characterized by solitariness. But after that, the similarities end.

Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing, and the loneliness is often experienced even when one is surrounded by people.

Solitude, on the other hand, is the state of being alone without being lonely. You spend time apart from others, but it is a positive and constructive state of engagement with yourself. So, while you are alone, you feel like you are with wonderful and sufficient company. The time spent in solitude can be used for reflection, inner searching or growth, as an opportunity to regain perspective or as a chance to get to know ourselves. Solitude is something you choose to do.

Perhaps our biggest mistake is the way we view solitude. For many people, the idea of solitude is very confusing: If they ask for it, they feel guilty; if it is granted, they feel abandoned. People talk about their families and express gratitude if they receive "time off" to engage in their own pursuits. It is as if they are prisoners who are granted parole and they feel that their freedom is a gracious gift. The result is that they have a hard time ever suggesting the possibility of spending a relaxing day alone. Why is time with ourselves something that has to be "earned"? Why must we feel guilty about asking for time to be alone? It's sad that the idea of solitude is so misunderstood, because it's a very important human need.

It's important to nurture our relationship with ourselves because: 1) we are, in one sense, always alone, and 2) we are, in another sense, never alone. No one else shares the exact same thoughts, feelings, sensations and experiences, ever. So, in that sense, we are always alone. However, we are never alone because no matter what happens, we're the one person who's always there. We are our own companions, for better or worse. Thus, to gain peace of mind and spirit, we need to learn how to accept and "be with" ourselves.

If you consistently avoid or dislike solitude, there's usually a reason. Are you challenged by it or bored? Must you be surrounded with the frenzy that we've come to accept as normal? If so, work on your thoughts about solitude. Set aside some distraction-free time and pay close attention to your experience to identify what makes it hard for you.

Then, to benefit from what solitude has to offer, you need to counter the harsh judgments that you have about yourself and about being alone with yourself. Be willing to just reconsider your judgments and to suspend them long enough for solitude to take full effect. Allow yourself to gather a little more evidence about the experience.

To gain the most benefits, solitude is something that you need to invest in consistently. This can happen in big doses or little, during periodic vacations or for just a few minutes every day. You can have alone time in your backyard, in your bubble bath, on your porch, sitting quietly under a tree in the park, taking a walk in the woods, having lunch by yourself at a coffee shop, engaging in a favorite hobby or whatever else feels nurturing. Let the experience of solitude unfold in the way that's best for you. If you make it this far, your experience of solitude is bound to change. Solitude will be able to reveal its true splendor, which is an emerging "you" that is allowed to blossom and grow richer and fuller with vibrant creativity.

Alone time is a great protector of the self and the human spirit. We need to learn how to live each moment as a new moment, with greater sensitivity to our own thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. That is the real message of alone time, and it is through the profound self-awareness gained in alone time that our lives will flower.