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WELLBEING QUICKSTART

Alone or Lonely?

‘By Myself’ vs ‘With Myself’

Many people struggle with feeling lonely – feeling sad, isolated, anxious and uncertain. Loneliness is on the rise in our society – even when we are surrounded by co-workers, family and friends. So what is ‘loneliness’ and how is it different to the experience of ‘solitude’ – being alone in a positive way?

Loneliness is the negative feeling experienced when our needs for love and connection are unmet by the people we socialise with – resulting in feelings of being disconnected or empty. The key phrase here is ‘needs for love and connection’. When we live in a state of unconditional self-love we can meet our own needs for love and connection through self-reflection and affirmation – and in our busy schedules we actively seek out ‘solitude’ – a time to reflect and nurture ourselves – a time where I can be ‘with myself’.



However, when our self-love is conditional, or we actively dislike aspects of ourselves, we cannot meet our own needs for love and connection and must rely on others for this. This need for connection with others will be felt to a greater or lesser degree depending on the ‘triggers’ of dislike for ourselves we are experiencing. Thus, we will avoid spending time ‘by myself’ as it amplifies the negative feelings we have towards ourselves and instead place more pressure on social connections around us to meet our needs (as well as being more worried about the stability of these same relationships).

For people struggling with long-term patterns of loneliness, the strong need for social connection is entirely understandable as a ‘survival mechanism’ from much earlier years when staying connected to caregivers was crucial to basic survival. Any threat to this stability could have been catastrophic so the default response to people being unhappy around us was self-blame and self-improvement – in doing so we became much more self-critical as a way of preventing loss of social connection.

However, instead of dropping the ‘survival instinct’ once we grew a bit older and realised we would survive even when our caregivers were unhappy we remained focused on keeping the social network around us happy and connected (and sacrificed our own need for self-love). Thus we never learned how to ‘rest in a state of self-love’ and enjoy being alone in solitude – but rather felt lonely when we were by ourselves and compulsively sought out connections with other people for validation and love.

The key to overcoming loneliness is to enjoy our own company as much as we enjoy spending time with others and this requires unconditional self-love. For many people learning how to unconditionally love themselves is tricky given their childhood development and societal norms. However, being able to experience the joy that comes from spending time ‘with yourself’ as opposed to ‘by yourself’ is essential for your health and wellbeing!

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