

What Is Solitude?

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Loneliness is what gnaws at us when connections fail. But solo time is essential, can help us think clearly, breathe calmly, and even feel content. Loneliness is marked by a sense of isolation. Solitude, on the other hand, is a state of being alone without being lonely and can lead to self-awareness.

As the world spins faster and faster—or maybe it just seems that way when an email can travel around the world in fractions of a second—we mortals need a variety of ways to cope with the resulting pressures. We need to maintain some semblance of balance and some sense that we are steering the ship of our life.

Otherwise we feel overloaded, overreact to minor annoyances and feel like we can never catch up. As far as I'm concerned, one of the best ways is by seeking, and enjoying, solitude.

That said, there is an important distinction to be established right off the bat. There is a world of difference between solitude and loneliness, though the two terms are often used interchangeably.

From the outside, solitude and loneliness look a lot alike. Both are characterized by solitariness. But all resemblance ends at the surface.

Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing. It is possible to be with people and still feel lonely—perhaps the most bitter form of loneliness.

Solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself. Solitude is desirable, a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company.

Solitude is a time that can be used for reflection, inner searching or growth or enjoyment of some kind. Deep reading requires solitude, so does experiencing the beauty of nature. Thinking and creativity usually do too.

Solitude suggests peacefulness stemming from a state of inner richness. It is a means of enjoying the quiet and whatever it brings that is satisfying and from which we draw sustenance. It is something we cultivate. Solitude is refreshing; an opportunity to renew ourselves. In other words, it replenishes us.

Loneliness is harsh, punishment, a deficiency state, a state of discontent marked by a sense of estrangement, an awareness of excess aloneness.

Solitude is something you choose. Loneliness is imposed on you by others.

We all need periods of solitude, although temperamentally we probably differ in the amount of solitude we need. Some solitude is essential; It gives us time to explore and know ourselves. It is the necessary counterpoint to intimacy, what allows us to have a self worthy of sharing. Solitude gives us a chance to regain perspective. It renews us for the challenges of life. It allows us to get (back) into the position of driving our own lives, rather than having them run by schedules and demands from without.

Solitude restores body and mind. Loneliness depletes them.