

SUMMARY

HOW TO BE ALONE

Sara Maitland



Summary of “How to be Alone” by Sara Maitland

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«How to be Alone» challenges our fear of solitude by daring us to cut through the noise of our everyday lives and spend just a few moments on our own.

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Introduction

I love spending time on my own. And although it didn't start out that way, going out by myself has become a type of social experiment as I wait for people's reactions. Waiters keep asking me if someone else will be joining me. I get weird looks at bars when I cheerfully sit down to enjoy a book, a cocktail, and my own company. And don't even get me started on solo vacations! In response to comfortably spending time by myself, I've been told everything from "You're so brave!" to "But don't you have any friends?" And the more I've investigated these increasingly bizarre reactions, the more I've concluded that people are terrified of being alone. Sara Maitland arrived at the same conclusion, so in the course of this summary, you'll learn why our society is so scared of individuality, why we're ill-equipped to be alone, and why we need to learn how to be by ourselves.

Time Alone Can Save Your Life

Although society frequently judges those deemed “loners” and assumes that anyone who lives on their own must be doing so because they are either too weird or too desolate to acquire companionship, we all crave at least some moments where we’re by ourselves. After all, our first thought after a long day is usually, “I need some me time!” And whether that involves collapsing in front of the sofa with no one around to bother us or relaxing in a bubble bath with a nice glass of wine, we all crave that precious “me time” and we all find it rejuvenating.

Why? Because spending time alone allows us to get back in touch with our true “self.” Because the increasing pressures of the work day demand that we stay social, active, and hyper-focused during every minute of every day, we don’t just burn out, we lose ourselves in the daily grind. We lose track of our inner voice, of our goals, thoughts, dreams, and quirks that make us the people we are when no one else is around. And it’s only when your self can exist freely and quietly, without the noise of others drowning us out, that you can get back in touch with the real “you.”

And although you’re probably tracking with me when it comes to alone time in small doses, how would you feel about a longer retreat? How about a couple of years? That’s what Henry David Thoreau did in the mid-1800s, and the years he spent in quiet contemplation and self-discovery imbued him with the insight, creativity, and self-awareness to craft his seminal work, *On Walden Pond*, which was published in 1854. Likewise, the influential author and feminist critic Virginia Woolf argued that creativity could not flourish without solitude. In her groundbreaking text, *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf asserted that the lack of female writers in the 1920s could not be attributed to a lack of talent or ambition, but rather to the fact that most women lacked the space, respect, and privacy to let their creativity blossom.

So, if we reflect for a moment on the link between solitude and creativity, you might have to ask yourself: what could I achieve? If you allowed your-

self to spend some time alone, to be rejuvenated and unlock your creativity,
what could you become?

Embrace a Transcendent Connection

What do you feel connected to? What motivates you to unplug from technology and the chaos of your everyday life in order to tap into something better? If you don't currently have anything that gives you that feeling, Maitland suggests nature. Because if you think about it, immersing yourself in the beauty and tranquility of nature is pretty much the only way to truly disconnect and find that peaceful solitude we just discussed. If you're alone in a beautiful forest or engaged with an invigorating hike, you'll not only be forced to disconnect from your phone, you'll also be invited to get out of your own head.

So, start by making sure you're completely alone. In moments where you're pursuing peaceful contemplation, even bringing your dog along can be a distraction, so don't rely on the crutch of a pet's company (no matter how much fun it can be!) Instead, use these moments to give yourself the freedom to completely disconnect from the hustle and bustle of your everyday life and thoughts. And as you allow yourself to relinquish these constraints, focusing only on the landscape in front of you and the realization that your problems feel so small amidst this vastness, you'll begin to feel connected to something bigger than yourself.

Thoreau knew the power of these excursions and asserted that the freedom of his creative expression could be attributed to his connection with nature. He called this connection "transcendence," meaning a state of mind in which you transcend the trivial concerns of daily life. But unlocking the benefits of transcendence isn't just limited to literary geniuses like Thoreau! It's accessible to everyone who's willing to push past their comfort zone and engage in the solitude required for quiet contemplation. And as you undertake this journey, it might also interest you to know that the power of transcendence is pretty universally revered. Across multiple cultures and throughout centuries, people have recognized the value of being alone.

For example, in aboriginal Australian cultures, teenagers are sent on a solitary journey when they reach a certain age. This mandatory coming of age

ritual-- referred to as a “walkabout”-- is a six-month journey undertaken in solitude with the implication that six months spent alone in nature will help you get to know yourself and be better prepared for adulthood. Likewise, in the Middle Ages, anyone training to become a monk or a knight would be required to spend a certain period of time alone in quiet contemplation. In each case, this time of self-discovery is viewed as critical for making the transition to adult society and helping us become better people. So, why shouldn't we give it a shot?

Why Are we so Afraid of Loners?

Now that we've talked about all the benefits of being alone, you might be reconsidering your previous assumptions. But because those negative assumptions are so prevalent, we now have to ask: if being alone is so good for you, why is it that people who spend time alone are often viewed as weird, selfish, or even unnatural? And how did we get those ideas? Well, Maitland posits that that's because society often fears individualism. And as we've seen through the examples of Woolf and Thoreau, what does solitude nurture? Our sense of individuality.

But if that's such a good thing, why are we afraid of it? Maitland cites a study conducted by philosopher Philip Koch, whose book *Solitude* explores our society's negative reactions to those who choose solitude as an active lifestyle. Koch suggests that our evolution might be responsible, since people evolved to find success in companionship. Because our base instincts invite us to equate numbers with safety and security, we may be inherently suspicious of those who willfully stand out from the herd. And although we might encourage self-expression through fashion choices or creative pursuits that endorse individualism, we may be a little more wary of those who don't appear to need society's validation of their lifestyle.

Likewise, people may be suspicious of those who prefer solitude because we know that we need companionship to be happy. Due to extensive psychological research proving that human connection is essential for happiness and personal growth, we may inherently assume that those who choose solitude are rejecting that connection and in turn, rejecting happiness. But that doesn't have to be true! Although we all need friendship and the support of other people, a life spent in quiet contemplation doesn't hinge on the rejection of others.

And it's also important to remember that different people have different levels of optimum social interaction. That shouldn't be too hard to understand, after all; we all know that introverts and extroverts are a thing! So, because we know that, we can accept that some people thrive on constant human interaction while others flourish through using time alone to

recharge. The ultimate point is that it's different for everyone and we should remember that the stigma surrounding solitude is generally the fault of unfair or ignorant stereotypes. So, don't let them hold you back!

Overcoming Your Fear of Being Alone

Because of the stigma which surrounds solitude, it's very possible that you might have some fears or suspicions about disconnecting for awhile. So, what can you do to combat those and unlock your potential? Well, first it's important to identify your fears and be honest with yourself. You should also be aware that these fears may not always be ever-present or in the forefront of your mind. In some cases, they may manifest as the feeling that you'd like to be alone but, for some reason, you just can't ever find the time. This is an example of a subconscious fear that keeps you from seeking solitude. So, take time for a self-assessment and be prepared to clear the cobwebs of these doubts from your mind.

And once you acknowledge them, you can take a few small, practical steps to fighting them. If you're afraid that time spent by yourself will be overwhelming or too lonely, try it in micro-doses to test your comfort levels. For example, instead of taking a shower-- where you're likely to rush through on your way to the next task of the day-- try taking a long, slow bubble bath. Get comfortable and allow yourself to linger on the sensation of being alone in a relaxing, intimate place. See where your thoughts go and how you feel about the directions they take you in. And if it's more comfortable, you can even try being alone in a crowd, like actively zoning out through the aid of books or music while you're on a crowded bus or train.

By assessing your comfort level in these small ways, you can soon upgrade to something more Thoreau-style, like solitary walks, or time spent creating something, as in the case of Virginia Woolf. No matter how you work your way up to it, the important thing is that you're taking active steps to cultivating healthy practices in your everyday life. Remember that time alone doesn't have to be scary and that it doesn't mean you have to shut others out. Instead, it's about the simple practice of taking time out of your day for you.

Riding Solo

But once you identify your comfort level and learn to love doses of being alone, you may find that you still have some doubts about how you can fit time for solitude and rejuvenation into your schedule. And given the hectic pace of our everyday lives, that's a pretty valid concern! However, the good news is that it often can be easier than you might think. You can start by taking advantage of some solitary activities you already enjoy or by replacing these with activities that might be more helpful. For example, you might enjoy watching TV by yourself, but it's unlikely that *Orange Is the New Black* is going to facilitate a transcendent experience. Likewise, reading and listening to music are activities which can lead to contemplation or can serve as white noise that blocks out meaningful thought.

So, take stock of the activities you currently enjoy alone and see if any changes need to be made. While no one's suggesting you have to cut Netflix bingeing entirely, it might be that you could take an hour from the time you usually spend on that and instead use it to take a walk. Redirecting yourself into activities which invite you to stop focusing on the noise of other people-- be it their words, music, or conversations-- is a great way to carve out small doses of alone time in your day. So, as we suggested in the second chapter, try taking a short walk on your own without music or an exercise buddy and give yourself the opportunity to reflect, recharge, and reconnect with nature.

And once you've mastered these micro-doses of alone time in your everyday life, it might be time to take it to the next level: going on your very own solo adventure. As someone who frequently travels alone, I can confirm that this is, hands down, one of the most rejuvenating experiences out there. Because whether you're going on a weekend exploration of a town you've never visited, a solo hiking trip for reflection, or checking out a new country on your own, traveling by yourself pushes you in ways your daily life never will. So, figure out what type of travel experience would be most enjoyable (and most realistic) for you and then go do it! Dare to open yourself up to this experience and see what you can learn.

Find Your Active Imagination

If you ever daydreamed as a kid (and honestly, who didn't??) then the idea of being taught to daydream probably sounds ridiculous. But as kids, it was so easy to simply let our minds drift away, awash in possibilities and questions. As kids, the world held endless magic for us, and that's precisely what we lose touch with as we grow older. Because although we might still love to imagine what it would be like if our houses were made of candy or if we suddenly woke up with superpowers, we can't indulge those daydreams for long before they run into the awkward roadblocks of things like remembering to pay the bills or prepping for that meeting tomorrow.

And that's exactly why we have to actively cultivate our imaginations as adults. Because although we might not realize it at first, imagination is tied to solitude, and in turn, the development of our creative thought. In fact, Maitland cites the findings of psychologist Donald Winnicott, which proved that our ability to find happiness in solitude actually originates in infancy. Because early childhood enabled us to rely on our parents for basic needs, we were able to rest in the satisfaction and security of knowing our needs were met, which in turn taught us to feel at peace with our own minds.

Devoid of threats or responsibilities, young children are free to explore and imagination and feel comfortable in their own skin. It's the first time we learned to appreciate solitude and the ability to lose ourselves in quiet contemplation or daydreams. As we grow, however, that changes. For once we enter the world of responsibility and social pressure, our inner worlds become cluttered with the expectations and pressures put upon us by others and we begin to internalize this until our own minds are no longer free and happy spaces. That's when we learn what it feels like to be anxious when lost in our own thoughts and to crave the presence of others who can distract us.

And as we all know, it only gets more stressful from there! That's why, as we grow, we continue to lose touch with our active imaginations or the ability to lose ourselves in a daydream. But the good news is that it doesn't have

to be that way forever. By applying psychoanalyst Carl Jung's theory of reverie, we can reclaim the power of our daydreams. Jung posited that examining our subconscious can unlock happiness, so he recommended that his patients spend time alone reflecting on their thoughts and writing them down.

By recording those thoughts in a notebook, he theorized that you could identify which specific types of thoughts made you happy and which thought patterns lead you down positive roads. He also believed that the happiness found in daydreaming is closely linked to our first pleasurable experiences with solitude, and thus suggested that his patients attempt to provide themselves with a safe space where they could recreate that type of childhood reverie. So, as you develop your practice of being alone, don't forget to daydream. Carve out some time to let your mind wander towards pleasant things and write them down for yourself. When you look back over this collection of happy thoughts, you'll not only reconnect with the happiest parts of your childhood, you'll cultivate positive thought patterns for your future!

Give Your Children the Gift of Solitude

If you've ever looked around at this generation of kids and thought of the term "helicopter parent," you're not alone. Because in our quest to become our best selves and help our children do the same, it seems we're often terrified to let our children get hurt. And because we want desperately for them to be happy and well adjusted, that often means we're also afraid for them to be alone because of the social connotations solitude carries. We're afraid our kids will get labeled "weird," that they won't make friends, that they won't fit in well. But when we shield them from spending time alone, we fail to see that we're actually keeping them from developing the very traits that would help them to become happy, well-adjusted people!

Childhood behavioralists Anthony Storr and Richard Louv concur, adding that learning to be alone is vital for childhood development, and Maitland cites a few of their suggestions for encouraging our children to cultivate a healthy sense of personal space. Starting as early as toddlerhood, they advocate creating a safe area where your child can explore independently. Whether it's in a safe corner of your local park or a sheltered area of the woods, give them the freedom to have adventures of their own. While of course you should always be close enough to offer adult supervision, you should also give them just enough room to feel like they have their individual space. You might be surprised to see just how much their creativity and imagination will flourish!

Likewise, Storr and Louv affirm that storytime should be a space for cultivating individuality as well. Acknowledging that many classic childhood stories like *The Snow Queen* celebrate children battling evil and having adventures on their own, they suggest that incorporating stories with these themes can encourage your child to become her own person and grow into a spirit of individuality.

Find Your Perfect Dose of Solitude

Remember when we talked about introverts and extroverts and how everyone's capacity for alone time is different? Well, as true as that is, that only scratches the surface and we have to be aware of that when developing our personal relationship with solitude. That's because there's no single, definitive way to measure a person's level of introversion or extroversion. Because each person is different, we all have different reactions to certain situations. For example, you might think that asking someone if she likes going to parties will tell you whether she's an introvert or extrovert. But in fact, it's not that simple.

Introverts can enjoy a party just as much as their extroverted counterparts; it might just depend on what type of party it is and if that person in particular feels comfortable. Another simple difference might be that a more introverted person might be inclined to go to fewer parties or might need more time to recharge afterwards. And because personality differences exist on a wide spectrum, it's impossible to put people in a specific category based on one simple question. The same is true for determining the amount of alone time that's right for us.

Whether you're an introvert or an extrovert, only you know exactly what does and doesn't work for you. And because individuality is one of the definitive benefits of solitude, it's important to begin your journey by putting that into practice. Don't start your journey towards individuality with someone else's notion of how much time alone you need. So, jumpstart this opportunity by getting to know more about yourself. The more you discover about you are, the better you'll understand what you need. And as you give yourself the freedom to be alone in the ways that work for you, the more fulfilled you'll be.

Final Summary

Although our society often fears and misunderstands being alone, it's important to relinquish these stereotypes and embrace our right to solitude. By doing so, we can unlock the numerous benefits of learning to be alone such as self-discovery, transcendence, and creative focus.



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