

A photograph of a desert landscape with sand dunes. A path of footprints leads from the foreground into the distance, following the ridges of the dunes. The lighting is warm, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

THE IMPORTANCE OF
Solitude
FOR A BALANCED LIFE

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Note: This little book is not about forced solitude or how to deal with it. It's not about being lonely or running away from the world into a cave in the mountains. Rather, solitude is an exercise of nurturing your state of mind to achieve interior freedom. Read on to discover the many advantages of solitude.

PUT YOUR LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE

Being in your own company gives you the chance to see where you're heading in terms of your relationships, career, and spiritual evolution. If you spend at least a half an hour each day looking back at the previous day and analyzing how you lived it, you'll gain some great insights. That's the power of perspective!

One thing you may realize as you self-reflect is that the greatest amount of time and energy spent on an average day goes into maintaining healthy relationships. But when you're alone, you can decide which ones are worth keeping and nurturing. Remember that ***a good relationship is one that allows both people involved to grow into better people.*** Ask yourself whether your relationships follow this wise counsel.

In the same way, consider your career. If you have a career goal, are you heading in the right direction? Have you been in a hopeless work situation for far too long because you're afraid of change? Is there some other profession that you dream of constantly?

What are your priorities in life? The answer to this question is *extremely* important. For instance, you might think that nurturing your creative pastimes or your children are more important than your day

job. If so, would it make sense to take the plunge and freelance, instead of continuing with your 9 to 5 job?

LEARN TO BE INDEPENDENT

Psychoanalysts say that the capacity to spend time alone is the mark of *emotional maturity*.

So what is meant by *solitude*? Well, when you're sitting by yourself glued to your cell phone, or browsing your Facebook account, it is *not* solitude.

In fact, in these days of hi-tech gadgets that enable people to communicate with each other regardless of where they may be, it's difficult to find those who actually *prefer* solitude. But perhaps you will prefer some occasional solitude, once you see the many benefits.

For example, if you can't find a companion to go to the movies, do you still go by yourself? Of course, there's no *physical* harm in going alone, is there?

You don't have to be in the company of others in order to feel fulfilled and happy. In solitude, you like your *own* company!

Being alone often helps you to think deeper about the challenges in your life. And when you're emotionally and mentally prepared, you'll be better able to meet them head on.

It's an empowering feeling to figure things out for yourself. You'll begin to love yourself for your own competence and resourcefulness, and loving yourself is important if you want others to love you!

“It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after one's own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

GET THOSE CREATIVE JUICES FLOWING

Creative minds value solitude. Even people like Mozart and Brahms, who could concentrate on their creations when surrounded by people, could do so only because they were absorbed in their own thoughts. This was their chosen state of solitude.

However, most creative minds require *physical* solitude. In a special private space created by a lack of distractions from friends and lovers, plenty of growth takes place.

For instance, a creative writer always has the seeds of stories germinating in his brain. These take time to incubate and manifest, and this process requires contemplation. But how can you contemplate when you're constantly with others or enslaved by the telephone and television? And then you might very well complain of the well-known "writer's block!" In creative writing, you need time to be alone and do your research. Doing so will spring more ideas and you'll be able to *actually write!*

Anthony Storr, author of *Solitude*, notes that writers of genius like Tolstoy and Beatrix Potter found their creativity declining when they were enmeshed in family matters and interpersonal relationships.

Storr says: "*Creative artists are quite likely to choose relationships which will further their work, rather than relationships which are intrinsically rewarding, and their spouses may well find their marital relations take second place.*"

“When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer - say, traveling in a carriage, or walking after a good meal, or during the night when I cannot sleep; it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly.”

- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

ENRICH YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

The benefits of solitude are many, yet society primes us to believe that interpersonal relationships are the answer to *every* problem. As psychologists point out, divorce and separation rates are on the rise because couples have to switch from office mode to romantic dinner without any breathing space in between. Does that sound familiar?

You need a break from your great love on a regular basis.

Allow her to do the things she wants. Let him spend time with his buddies and his hobbies without complaining. The tighter you hold on to each other, the more hemmed in you'll both feel, which may even lead to resentment and raging outbursts.

You both need your own space to do the good things you desire, so you can put your relationship in perspective. They say that love is blind, but it's crucial for you to be able to see your beloved objectively.

This means that you need to appreciate their positive qualities, but also be aware of their negative side.

Any marriage counselor will tell you that couples who are *always* together are the ones who end up having the most violent arguments. The arguments may just be a subconscious attempt to get some time alone.

So, if he has his breakfast alone once in a while, while you're still in bed and vice versa, it's absolutely all right. Or if you go jogging alone, that's fine too. Both of you need time by yourselves, but not so much that your lover feels lonely and neglected, of course. Try to find the right balance between solitude and intimacy.

“But let there be spaces in your togetherness and let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.”

- Kahlil Gibran

CONTEMPLATE AND GROW SPIRITUALLY

Solitude provides us with the opportunity for contemplation and self-reflection – both of which are essential for achieving spiritual

peace. The Buddha attained enlightenment after long and intense meditation on the challenges posed by the human condition. Jesus spent forty days alone in the wilderness, struggling with the tempting devil, before he felt ready to guide others.

In the Bible, we learn that Moses regularly left his family and companions to make time for communing with God. Just like your body, your spiritual self needs nurturing, too. Feed it with contemplation and prayer.

In solitude, you can see the being within you – the True Self – that is waiting patiently to manifest itself. Being alone will show you the clouds of doubt and negativity that obscure this self. You will discover the way to dissolve these clouds, and then your bright core will shine through.

“Unconsciousness creates the pain-body (the false self); consciousness transmutes it into itself (the true Self). St.

Paul expressed this universal principle beautifully: ‘Everything is shown up by being exposed to the light, and whatever is exposed to the light itself becomes light.’”

- Eckhart Tolle

TRANSFORM YOURSELF

Solitude is the tool you require to transform your bad habits and negative emotions. Being alone helps you see yourself clearly, repent your mistakes, and usher in change.

- * The process begins only when you can pinpoint your negative qualities and shortcomings.
- * The next step is to think deeply about how you have affected others through your bad habits and unbridled emotions, causing them pain.
- * The final step is to desire change and make an effort towards it. If you have a strict and loving spiritual mentor who is honest with you, you are fortunate, because he or she can help you see the things you need to change.

Transformation requires a change in mental attitude, which makes solitude indispensable.

When you're constantly in the company of others, there's pressure on you to conform. For instance, it's extremely difficult for people to abstain from drinking and smoking when they are surrounded by friends who indulge in these activities. Or it might be your habit to sit in front of the television, drink in hand. **Observing**

yourself objectively will help you become a better person to be around.

“Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self.”

- Henri J. M. Nouwen, Out of Solitude

ENJOY DOING WHAT YOU LIKE

One of the greatest advantages of solitude is freedom to do what you desire. You can read for as long as you want, watch that TV documentary about space without having to fight for the remote control, get up when you want, listen to your kind of music... the list is endless.

No explanation of Solitude is complete without the inspiring example of poet, philosopher and transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, who wrote *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* – a true account of his experiment in self-reliance.

Thoreau lived for more than two years in a cabin he built himself on the property of his poet friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The cabin

was on the edge of Walden Pond, and here he spent his days, writing and contemplating himself as well as nature.

With his writings, Thoreau inspired great minds like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. ***Today, he is a beacon to those who look to solitude and nature for spiritual harmony within themselves.*** In pursuing solitude, you can look to his writings for some sage advice.

About Thoreau, Emerson said: *“He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco... and knew how to be poor without the least hint of squalor or inelegance.”*

“The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready.”

- Henry David Thoreau

THINGS TO DO IN YOUR SOLITUDE

What, you may wonder, can you do while you're pursuing solitude? Do you have to just sit there and contemplate? No, not at all! There are many activities you can engage in while you're alone.

Here are some great activities to do while taking advantage of solitude:

1. Keep a journal. Writing a journal is therapeutic and a stress-buster. It also helps you understand yourself because, in a journal, you describe your feelings, conversations with others, hopes and goals, as well as failures and successes.

* A journal is your constant companion, and the most undemanding one. It doesn't ask for anything and is always ready to accept. *Writing in your journal is like talking to a friend.* It could even bring out the talented writer in you. And someday you'll read it again to refresh a cherished memory or go back to a lesson learnt.

* Keeping a journal clarifies your thoughts and beliefs. It helps you look at challenges afresh and find solutions, but you must write every week, if not every day to see its benefits. According to research, *journaling also has health benefits:*

- ▶ Journaling boosts the function of cognition.
- ▶ It reduces the severity of asthma and arthritis, as well as other illnesses.
- ▶ It strengthens the immune system.

“I guess whatever maturity is there may be there because I've been keeping a journal forever. In high school my friends would make fun of me – you're doing your man diary again. So I was always trying to translate experience into words.”

- Anthony Doerr

2. Reduce stress and promote healing with classical music.

Much has been written about the “*Mozart Effect*” and its ability to improve spatial and visual skills as well as reduce the number of seizures in epileptic patients. But we’ll leave that behind and focus on the stress-relieving effects of listening to classical music.

- * Dr. Rosalia Staricoff, Research Director at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London, says: *“The physiological benefits have been measured. Music reduces blood pressure, the heart rate, and hormones related to stress.”*
- * It’s very easy to overtax the brain. You do it when you:
 - ▶ Undergo stressful situations
 - ▶ Don’t sleep your full 8 hours
 - ▶ Drink too much coffee, tea, or alcohol
 - ▶ Smoke

- * All these activities reduce the blood flow to the brain. The result? Your brain can't work efficiently. Stress releases toxic hormones, which affect your memory centers. ***Prolonged stress destroys brain cells.***
- * What causes stress? Much of it is subjective and caused by emotionally trying situations. Some common environmental factors include loud noises, air pollution, overcrowding, tobacco smoke, the weather, the clutter and colors in a room, an uncomfortable chair, even the amount of lighting in the room.
- * ***So listen to Swan Lake by Tchaikovsky, Ravel's Bolero, or Beethoven's masterpieces while you're working or about to sleep. You'll feel the stress melt away!***

*“Music washes away from the soul
the dust of everyday life.”
- Berthold Auerbach*

3. **Do some gardening.** Have you ever experienced the pleasures of eating fruit from your own garden? ***A garden is a perpetual wonder.*** Every day you can find something new – a tender shoot, a bud, the first blush of sweetness on a ripening apple, or the full bloom glory of a flower. As the gardener, you're responsible for all this beauty!

- * In addition, you'll experience the sensual pleasures of soil and velvety petals, the burst of flavor in your mouth, the invigorating and tranquil effect of fresh air and the outdoors. What's more, it's good exercise. It's well known that **human beings have an innate attraction to nature**. Just yield to it!

*“To forget how to dig the earth and
to tend the soil is to forget ourselves.”*
- Mohandas K. Gandhi

4. **Read a good book.** Choose what you read with care. Read books that have a positive message or those that teach you something valuable. ***Here are the many benefits of reading:***

- * Reading boosts your intelligence because it forces you to *actively* process information quickly and with great detail. It's not a passive activity like watching television.
- * ***Books can teach you how to polish your skills.*** Think of any skill and there's bound to be a book about it.
- * Reading increases your vocabulary.

- * You can engage in some armchair traveling to places you've never seen.
 - * ***Your stress will be reduced as you lose yourself in a beautiful new world.*** The constantly changing pictures on television, and especially commercials, only increase your stress.
 - * Reading improves your concentration.
 - * You'll notice a boost in your memory as you learn to remember plot details and characters.
 - * Books help to furnish your mind with information on various subjects, which will help your creative quotient soar.
 - * Reading also makes you more knowledgeable and a better conversationalist.
 - * ***You'll be able to discover something new and exciting.*** For instance, read *The Secret Life of Nature* by Peter Tompkins, who wrote the best-selling *The Secret Life of Plants*. If you loved fairytales as a child, you'll be glad you did.
- 5. Cultivate a hobby.** Some people are lucky to have a hobby from an early age. Others find a passion for something constructive later in life. So if you don't have a hobby already, ***explore your interests and abilities to find your passion.***

- * A hobby helps you to:
 - ▶ Reduce stress
 - ▶ Improve your health
 - ▶ Enhance your confidence and self-esteem
 - ▶ Enrich your relationships

- * It's easy to see how a hobby can reduce stress. Naturally, with less stress comes better health. Engaging in a hobby is a great way to unwind and rejuvenate yourself. It'll feel like an oasis in a desert. ***Take a break from the daily grind and focus on something you love to do.***

- * You'll also gain more confidence and self-esteem when you discover you're good at something. As for your relationships with your partner or family, you'll find more harmony and balance.

- * Making someone the center of your life can lead to tension in the relationship, but when you cultivate a hobby, your partner will respect you and admire you even more. This will free them to do the same, and you'll find your relationship becoming happier and healthier.

“Today is life – the only life you are sure of. Make the most of today. Get interested in something. Shake yourself awake. Develop a hobby. Let the winds of enthusiasm sweep through you. Live today with gusto.”

- Dale Carnegie

As you've seen, solitude isn't a lonely pursuit at all! Alone-time reduces your stress in healthy, enjoyable ways, strengthens your relationships, and, best of all, it helps you be the best you can be. After all, you *deserve* to live a fulfilling, joyful life!