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HOW TO BE ALONE: AN INVESTIGATION OF SOLITUDE SKILLS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

PSYCHOLOGY

with an emphasis in FEMINIST STUDIES

by

Virginia D. Thomas

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Abstract

How to Be Alone: An Investigation of Solitude Skills

Virginia D. Thomas

Despite the documented benefits of volitional solitude for adolescents and adults, little is known about *solitude skills*, a term that has been mentioned only in passing in the literature. Psychologists have neither named nor described these skills, despite claims that such skills have important clinical and educational applications. To fill this gap in the literature, this dissertation presents findings from an exploratory study that interviewed eight adult creative writers to discern what skills they employed to reap the benefits of solitude. Qualitative methodology utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis yielded evidence for eight solitude skills, organized within two superordinate themes. Four skills comprised the theme *Connection with Self*: enjoyment of solitary activities; emotional regulation; introspection; and noticing and heeding internal signals to enter solitude; and four skills comprised the theme *Proactive Approach*: carving out time for solitude; negotiating with important others for time in solitude; being mindful of how time in solitude was spent; and balancing the needs for solitude and for sociability. In addition, themes from the qualitative analysis were consistent with several assertions about solitude in the psychological literature: solitude is a biological need; solitude supports identity development as well as intimacy with others; a preference for solitude reflects a pleasure in solitary activities rather than an aversion towards people; and solitude promotes happiness in the eudaimonic, rather than hedonic,

sense. Finally, the two superordinate themes categorizing these solitude skills converge to support what may be the fundamental function of solitude: facilitating a relationship with the self. Identifying these solitude skills represents an important contribution to alone theory, because they reveal important processes necessary for solitude to be experienced constructively, or even experienced at all. Empirically testing this preliminary set of solitude skills with other populations paves the way for creating and adapting solitude skills curricula for educational, clinical, and individual use.

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Hugo and Claire, who give me lots of opportunities to explore the complexities of balancing solitude and relationships.

How to be Alone: An Investigation of Solitude Skills

In Jane Austen's final published novel, *Persuasion*, her protagonist evaluates another character with this simple, compelling statement: "She had no resources for solitude" (Austen, 1817/2001, p. 27). What does it mean to have resources for solitude? And what are the implications of lacking such resources? In the field of psychology, researchers have invoked the term *solitude skills* (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982), hinting at what Jane Austen asserted two hundred years ago—that navigating the domain of solitude, and benefiting from time alone, may require specific psychological resources. However, to date, researchers have not articulated what these solitude skills consist of, nor how they might be taught. The clinical literature is sprinkled with claims that volitional solitude can serve as a clinical treatment for loneliness and depression (Burke, 1991; Knafo, 2012; Young, 1982), but the skills needed to transform alone time into a positive solitude experience rather than an isolating, terrifying one, remain unspecified. This dissertation fills this gap in the literature and lays the groundwork for a better understanding of how these skills can be taught. Moreover, this research contributes to *alone theory*, the need for which has been proposed but underexplored (Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999). Alone theory assumes that solitude is both a biologically based need necessary for regulation of stimuli (Buchholz, 1997) and a socio-emotional need necessary for identity development and the capacity for genuine intimacy (Winnicott, 1958). Development of alone theory requires identifying the functions of solitude and the skills necessary to use it constructively.

Solitude and its Benefits

Solitude is defined as volitional time spent by oneself that is generally used constructively; in other words, alone time that is sought after and utilized for the purpose of engaging in intrinsically motivated activities (Koch, 1994; Larson, 1990; Marcoen & Goossens, 1993). In addition, solitude is marked by an absence of communication and interaction with other people, typically—but not necessarily— involving physical separation from others. For example, someone may be in a public place but still be in solitude by choosing to not interact with others (Burger, 1995). Solitude then, is fundamentally a psychological place that can be accessed even when physical separation is difficult to acquire. Volition is important in this definition of solitude because it implies that one desires to be alone, which can reduce the risk of isolation or loneliness, and increases the chance that the experience will be positive or beneficial in some way (Larson, 1990; Long & Averill, 2003).

From a developmental perspective, research has indicated that time spent in solitude is beneficial for infants, children, and adolescents. Infants require alone time devoid of maternal engagement or social stimulation in order to develop the capacity for self-regulation (Beebe & Jaffe, 1992; Buchholz & Helbraun, 1999). Children who prefer solitary play demonstrate higher attention spans and display less emotional negativity and hostility than their more sociable peers (Coplan & Armer, 2007; Youngblade, Berlin, & Belsky, 1999). The majority of the empirical research on solitude has been conducted with adolescents, and here the literature shows solitude to be important for identity development (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999), emotional

regulation (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982), and capacity for introspection (Hansell, Mechanic, & Brondolo, 1986). Due to their increased needs for autonomy and higher capacity for abstract thinking, older adolescents and emerging adults benefit more from solitude than younger adolescents, especially in the areas of mood regulation and identity development (Larson, 1997; Long, et al., 2003; Wang, Rubin, Laursen, Booth-LaForce, & Rose-Krasnor, 2013). Research with U.S. college students has found that time spent in solitude correlates with higher self-awareness (Franzoi & Brewer, 1984). Little to no solitude research has been conducted with adults, although Larson (1990) did find that the elderly have the most alone time and feel the least lonely of all age groups, indicating that the ability to constructively use solitude does continue to increase throughout the lifespan. The singular empirical study of solitude in adulthood indicated that adults who reported high comfort in being alone showed greater satisfaction in life and lower depression than those adults who were uncomfortable spending time alone (Larson & Lee, 2006). Although very little empirical research has been conducted on solitude's relationship to creativity and spirituality, case studies and autobiographies indicate that solitude is also crucial in adulthood for creative expression and spiritual contemplation (Koch, 1994; Storr, 1998).

Despite such documented benefits, the domain of solitude has often been viewed as a deficiency of social relationships. For example, in the Forward to the recently released *Handbook of Solitude*, solitude is described as “an enormous social void” and readers are warned that solitude can be “ruinous” (Rubin, 2014, p. xii).

Indeed, Susan Cain (2012) has documented the Western bias toward sociability and extraversion, which views people who desire quiet and solitude as deviating from social norms, and thus appearing strange or deficient. Researchers at times conflate solitude with loneliness and isolation (for an example, see Dahlberg, 2007), and therefore may consider all states of aloneness to be maladaptive. It is important to distinguish whether a preference for solitude stems from a low desire to affiliate with others, called low *sociotropic* orientation, or whether it emerges from a high desire to engage in solitary activities, called high *solitropic* orientation (Leary, Herbst, & McCrary, 2003). The research on social withdrawal in childhood has discovered a similar distinction, resulting in two categories: *unsociability* versus *avoidance* (Coplan & Weeks, 2010). Both of these categories include a preference for solitary activities but only those in the *avoidance* category actively avoid peers and social contact. This is analogous to a low sociotropic orientation in adolescents and adults. While *unsociability* is not positively worded, it does denote the positive, adaptive aspect of social withdrawal, and is analogous to a high solitropic orientation.

The Relevance of Solitude in Adulthood. Despite the dearth of research on solitude in adulthood, recent social trends indicate such research is needed. Forty-four percent of college graduates in the U.S. aged 30-44 live alone, twice as many as those adults with only a high school education (PEW, 2010), which suggests that if they can afford to live alone, they choose to. While living alone is not necessarily a proxy for spending time alone, it does create more opportunities in terms of physical space for privacy and solitude. The sociological trend of an increase in the number of adults

who are choosing to live alone worldwide (Klinenberg, 2012) encourages researchers to take a second look at this phenomenon and what may be a corresponding desire to spend time in solitude.

There are good theoretical foundations to suspect that solitude in adulthood has important benefits. The middle years of life, after young adulthood has ended and before retirement and old age begin, represent the *generativity* stage of Erik and Joan Erikson's (1997) life stage model, a stage in which adults are typically faced with the task of engaging in meaningful life activities that contribute beneficially to their society (e.g. raising children, cultivating a career, creating art, being politically active). The generativity stage revolves around the concern that one is leading a meaningful, memorable life, one that includes both a focus on self—engaging in creativity and productivity that furthers one's identity development—and a focus on caring for others (Erikson, 1998; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). This focus on meaning during this life stage and its implications for well-being is important. Research on well-being has focused on either *hedonic* well-being, which centers around exhibiting positive, pleasant affect, and is measured by subjective well-being scales, or *eudaimonic* well-being, which focuses on personal growth and meaning in life and is measured by psychological well-being scales (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010). Solitude may be relevant during middle adulthood because of its connection with well-being. Linking solitude with eudaimonic well-being rather than hedonic well-being may be a more accurate representation of solitude's link with psychological functioning, and may help explain why previous studies have noted

that time in solitude is linked with low mood. For example, in Larson's (1990) research with adolescent and adult samples, moods typically lowered during solitude, but then rebounded to higher than normal levels upon exiting solitude. The implication is that solitude offers a "renewing effect on people's mood state" (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982, p. 48). Although they emerged feeling emotionally renewed, both age groups reported feeling more lonely when alone. It may be that solitude functions less as a happiness promoter in the hedonic sense (i.e. feeling good, experiencing pleasant emotions) and more as a pathway to well-being (i.e. mood regulation, self-reflection, experiencing purpose and meaning in life) in the eudaimonic sense. Despite the risk of feeling lonely or having a lowered mood, adolescents and adults in Larson and colleagues' studies consistently continued to spend time in solitude, indicating that the benefits outweighed the risks.

Solitude Skills in this Cultural Moment

Winnicott (1958) emphasized that the foundation for experiencing solitude rests in the individual's capacity to be alone. But what does this capacity consist of? The literature on solitude is curiously quiet on this. Capacity in a particular domain implies that we have acquired certain skills that enable us to engage, succeed, or otherwise participate there, whether it be capacity for musical rhythm, athletic endurance, mathematics, or intimacy in relationships. The term *solitude skills* was coined several decades ago (Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982) and has been mentioned sporadically since then in the fields of psychology (Buchholz, 1997; Davies, 1996; Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982; Long & Averill, 2003) and education

(Byrnes, 2001; Galanaki, 2005; Senechal, 2012). The term itself indicates that solitude entails hard work, and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1934) spoke of this difficulty: “It is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be a reason the more for us to do it” (p 53). Indeed, the research shows that with solitude comes the risk of difficult emotional states such as loneliness and boredom, as well as the risk of facing the hard tasks of identity work, introspection, and mood regulation (Koch, 1994; Larson, 1990).

However, to date there is a lack of understanding about what these solitude skills consist of, and how they might be taught. For example, educators have suggested the need for solitude skills curricula in our school systems (Byrnes, 2001; Galanaki, 2005), but have yet to articulate how children and adolescents can develop and use these skills productively. Although she does not lay out a specific set of solitude skills, Byrnes (2001) does write in passing that in order to benefit from solitude, children must learn how to relax the body and mind, develop the ability for introspection, be able to surmount the initial feelings of anxiety that can come with being alone, and be able to distinguish between loneliness and solitude. Byrnes also suggests that two requirements for the development of the capacity to be alone are creating time in the classroom for silence, and providing places where children can retreat by themselves so they can daydream, concentrate, reflect on their feelings, or engage in solitary leisure activities. In the clinical arena, Rook (1988) differentiated between loneliness that derives from a lack of social skills versus a lack of solitude skills, but she does not describe what these skills are. In addition, Young (1982)

mentions that the first of six treatment stages for loneliness is a prescription to be alone, but he does not elaborate on what this prescription entails nor how he trains his patients to cultivate the capacity to be alone, especially given that they are already lonely.

Despite these missing pieces in the literature, the concept of solitude skills is theoretically sound, and is analogous to the development of social skills. Social skills training has been successful in helping people of all ages move past social anxiety and other social interaction challenges in order to function more readily in interpersonal relationships and social groups (see Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010 for a review), and solitude skills may be similarly successful in helping individuals move past anxiety and loneliness in order to connect more deeply with themselves. Theoretically, as with social skills, solitude skills are socialized and practiced over time, with some individuals displaying higher mastery than others. Setting aside for the moment such individual differences, I suggest that some amount of solitude is valuable for most, if not all, individuals, especially at this cultural moment.

Due to the recent rapid increase in computer-mediated communication, more and more of us are spending time physically alone, but digitally connected to others through our mobile devices. Recent evidence suggests that high amounts of time spent on-line and using computer-mediated-communication (CMC) can lead to increased loneliness for both emerging adults and middle-aged and older adults (AARP, 2010; Brandtzaeg, 2012; Hu, 2009; Stepanikova, Nie & He, 2010). Loneliness is a real concern, as it leads to poor psychosocial outcomes (Cassidy &

Asher, 1992; Jones, 1982); however, preference for solitude has been found to be negatively correlated with loneliness (Burger, 1995; Thomas & Azmitia, 2014) and an increase in the capacity to be alone actually decreases feelings of loneliness (Youngblade, Berlin, & Belsky, 1999). Therefore, cultivating solitude skills may mitigate loneliness, as clinical researchers have suggested (Rook & Peplau, 1982). High connectivity demands can also lead to cognitive overload, which creates highly distractible behaviors (Strayer & Cooper, 2010) and increased stress (Dabbish & Kraut, 2006), thus creating a need for a restorative environment to recover from mental fatigue (Kaplan, 1995). Time in solitude may be one such restorative environment because it involves lowered stimulation, providing the *cognitive quiet* necessary to replenish, (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) and reflect (Koch, 1994). Empirical research has shown that spending time alone in nature, unplugged from CMC, can be especially restorative as well as conducive to creativity (Atchley, Strayer, & Atchley, 2012). However, without the skills to utilize solitude constructively, people turn to television, the Internet, and social media for distraction, relaxation, and mood regulation (Long & Averill, 2003). While these “down-time,” stress reduction activities can be useful in the short-term, they also distract people from engaging in the important and often challenging tasks such as identity exploration and emotional regulation, two known benefits of solitude. Furthermore, if people lack solitude skills, they may simply go inward only to find themselves lonely, bored or depressed.

In the United States, coinciding with these trends in social media use is a renewed interest in the practice of mindfulness and its corresponding well-being

benefits (Baer, 2003; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) techniques have been found to improve outcomes for individuals with a diverse array of issues, from chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982) to depression (Teasdale, et al., 2000). The Buddhist practice of mindfulness involves a process of paying attention to one's internal states, and invokes several similar qualities that have been noted in the literature on solitude, including concentration (Larson, 1997) and introspection (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that despite the deeply ingrained cultural values of extraversion and sociability, there is also curiosity and receptivity about internal states, which may extend to solitude and the skills necessary to reap the benefits.

Research Question

The present study investigated one basic question: What are the skills required to reap the psychological benefits of solitude? Identifying these solitude skills represents an important contribution to alone theory, as it may reveal important processes and mechanisms necessary for solitude to be experienced constructively, or even experienced at all.

Akin to the research on creativity (Kaufman, Gentile, & Baer, 2005), an effective approach to investigating solitude skills consists in turning to *solitude experts*, individuals who deliberately seek solitude, understand how to utilize it, and can articulate their experiences. A review of expertise in a variety of domains (Hatano & Oura, 2003) distinguished experts from novices in the following ways: experts have rich knowledge of the domain in question; experts have gained this knowledge

over years of experience with the domain; and their knowledge and experience over time have been accompanied by socioemotional changes, such as shifts in identity. Thus, purposive sampling was chosen as a form of recruitment. This study sought middle-aged adults who had extensive experience with solitude. This age represents the generativity stage of Erik and Joan Erikson's (1997) life stage model and taps adults who have the motivation, and presumably the skills, to regularly engage in solitude despite their social commitments.

Method

Recruitment

Because of solitude's noteworthy association with creativity (Koch, 1994; Storr, 1998), a sample of creative writers was recruited. A flyer was posted on an on-line creative writing network in California, which recruited all six women who participated in this study. The two men in the study were recruited through word of mouth.

Participants

Eight participants—two men and six women—between the ages of 33 and 61 participated in this study. All participants identified as White or Caucasian, and all but one, who was Australian, identified the United States as their nation of origin. All identified as creative writers, whether published or unpublished, in genres as diverse as poetry, memoir, and screenwriting. None of the participants were retired, and their professions related directly to writing (e.g. freelance editor, college professor of

English, writing tutor). All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity, and are as follows:

Matt, 42 years old, Professor of English, married, father of one.

Diana, 50 years old, writer, teacher, and freelance editor, married, mother of two.

Audrey, 50 years old, writer, in a relationship, no children.

Laurie, 54 years old, writer and teacher, married, legal guardian of nephew.

Nora, 39 years old, writer, married, mother of one.

Joan, 61 years old, freelance editor and writer, single, no children.

Philip, 33 years old, screenwriter and English tutor, single, no children.

Maeve, 49 years old, writer and editor, in a relationship, no children.

Procedure

This study was composed of three parts which each participant completed individually in the following sequence: a survey gathering demographic information and scores on a variety of psychological measures; an experiential component of time in solitude, termed a *solitude date*; and a semi-structured interview with the researcher.

Part one: Survey. Participants completed an on-line survey hosted by SurveyMonkey. They were provided with a unique user identification code to log in to the survey, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey collected demographic and behavioral data by asking questions about gender, ethnicity, occupation, educational level, average time spent in solitude per day and

week, and whether or not they had previous experiences of extended time in solitude. The survey also included personality and well-being measures. Only one measure represents a variable of interest for this dissertation, so the other measures will not be described nor analyzed here.

Measures.

Loneliness. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hays & DiMatteo, 1987) measures the extent to which one feels lonely in daily life by having participants rate eight statements on a four-point scale, from “never” to “always.” A sample item is “I feel left out.” High scores indicate loneliness and correlate positively with alienation and social anxiety. The original sample mean (35.4) was used as a cut-off score for loneliness. Obtaining each participant’s score on loneliness and ensuring that these scores fell below the cut-off reduced the possibility that this study sampled a lonely group of people, and thus avoided the pitfall of conflating solitude with loneliness.

Part two: Solitude date.

After completing the on-line survey, participants agreed to spend one full day in solitude, from the time they woke up in the morning until they fell asleep at night. They selected their date to take place within three months after completing the on-line survey. This rather generous timeline allowed participants adequate time to carve out their day alone, which sometimes took careful planning within their busy schedules. Participants were given no other instructions for how to spend their day in solitude except this: “If you choose to be in a public place, please keep your interactions and communication with others to a minimum.” Participants were also provided with a

worksheet to complete at the end of their day in solitude, which was an adapted form of the Day Reconstruction Method (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004; see Appendix A). The worksheet invited participants to jot notes about their day in solitude, including the various activities they engaged in, their moods throughout the day, and things they thought about during their solitude. Participants did not submit these worksheets to me at any point during the study; rather, they kept them for the purposes of referring to them as a memory aid during the interview.

Part three: Interview. Within 48 hours of completing their solitude date, participants engaged in a one-hour semi-structured with the researcher. The interview included questions about the solitude date specifically, as well as questions about their thoughts, reflections and experiences of solitude in general. The interview questions addressed potential solitude skills, such as managing barriers to utilizing solitude (e.g. lack of time, unsupportive significant others), and coping with loneliness, boredom and other negative emotions experienced during solitude. Participants also had an opportunity to comment on their own definitions and connotations of the word “solitude,” and compare those with how their family, community or society viewed this term (see Appendix B for the interview script). The interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis, and pseudonyms replaced real names to protect the participants’ identities.

Analysis

The method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Data was analyzed using the qualitative method *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

(IPA) (for a review, see Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is epistemologically grounded in two traditions: phenomenology, which seeks to describe and understand an individual's lived experience from their own perspective in such a detailed way that the particular becomes the essence of a more human universal experience; and hermeneutics, which invites the researcher to further interpret the meaning of participants' lived experiences from his or her perspective as a trained psychologist (Smith, 2004). IPA is particularly well suited when the researcher's aim is to investigate a particular phenomenon, and recruitment then centers on participants who are especially skilled in or have significant experiences with that phenomenon (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Both of these criteria were fulfilled in this study.

The methodological approach of IPA involves analysis that is “idiographic, inductive, and interrogative” (Smith, 2004, p. 41). First, the *idiographic* emphasis requires that the researcher analyze one case thoroughly before moving on to the next case, in order to understand the distinctive worldview of each participant. Second, IPA is similar to other qualitative methods in foregrounding the *inductive* approach, which is “bottom up” in terms of analysis. Rather than testing hypotheses, IPA analyzes data to shed light on exploratory questions about aspects of the human experience that have not yet been sufficiently investigated, and the researcher remains open to unexpected themes that emerge from the data itself. Throughout all levels of analysis the researcher stays close to the data, drawing from the participant's words directly, in order not to superimpose or overreach. Third, IPA is *interrogative* in the sense that the results are not isolated to this particular study; rather the analysis links

findings with extant literature, either by building on prior theories, adding detailed case study evidence to the empirical literature, or offering alternatives to mainstream explanations of the phenomenon in question.

Stages of analysis. There were four stages of analysis. One interview was selected as the first case, and was analyzed in detail before reading subsequent cases. As subsequent cases were analyzed, repeating themes were discerned to identify convergences among the data, and new themes were identified to detect divergences. An iterative process was used, whereby earlier transcripts were reviewed to determine whether new themes from subsequent cases were also present in the initial cases (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The first case.

Initial notes. During the first read of the transcript, initial notes were annotated in the left-hand margin. These initial notes highlighted interesting and significant aspects of the data, typically paraphrasing or using the participants' own words verbatim.

Emergent themes. During the second read of the transcript, initial notes were transformed into emergent themes, annotated in the right-hand margin. These emergent themes often took the form of captions or phrases which captured the essence of the content, and were more abstract and theoretical than the initial notes. Although emergent themes invoked psychological terminology that participants themselves may not have used, care was taken to stay close to the meaning of the participants' original words.

Connecting the themes. The emergent themes were listed chronologically as they appeared in the annotated transcript, and were then organized theoretically. Attempts were made to identify clusters of themes, also called *superordinate themes* which act as “magnets” that pull together several emergent themes that are theoretically related (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 70). These superordinate themes were checked against the transcript to ensure that they accurately matched the original meanings of the participants’ own words.

Table of themes. Once the superordinate themes from the first case were identified and named, identifiers such as direct quotes and line items from the transcript were linked to each theme to facilitate finding the original source.

Subsequent cases. The same process was utilized for subsequent cases until saturation of themes was reached. In the present study, after the fifth case the first step of taking initial notes was no longer needed because the data sorted coherently into the emergent themes and corresponding superordinate themes.

Master table of superordinate themes. During this process, certain emergent themes were dropped if they did not fit well in the superordinate structure nor were very rich in evidence from the transcripts. A final set of superordinate themes was determined based on their prevalence within the data, richness of the theme, and how much the theme illuminated other aspects of the account.

Narrative interpretation. The superordinate themes were translated into a narrative account, in which they were explained and illustrated with verbatim extracts from the cases.

Results

An iterative process of analysis using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003) yielded evidence for eight skills, organized within two superordinate themes: *Connection with Self* and *Proactive Approach* (see Table 1). The four skills within the theme *Connection with Self* showcased the ability of participants to psychologically connect with themselves, and the second set of four skills within the theme *Proactive Approach* all served to secure a basic need for solitude that participants felt was crucial for their well-being.

Table 1

Eight Solitude Skills Organized within Two Superordinate Themes

Connection with Self	Proactive Approach
Enjoyment of solitary activities	Carving out time for solitude
Emotional regulation	Negotiating with others for time in solitude
Introspection	Being mindful of how time in solitude was spent
Noticing and heeding internal signals to enter solitude	Balancing the needs for solitude and for sociability

Saturation of themes occurred after analyzing the first five transcripts, and the remaining three transcripts validated the findings. All eight participants exhibited evidence of these skills through stories, recollections, and reflections about solitude during their interviews. Excerpts and quotes considered most illustrative of these solitude skills are featured in the sections below.

Results from the short-form of the UCLA Loneliness Scale showed that all participants scored well below the cut-off score, indicating that none of the participants could be described as lonely (See Table 2).

Table 2

Participants' Scores on the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Hays & DiMatteo, 1987)

	Loneliness Score
Matt	9
Diana	16
Audrey	22
Laurie	18
Nora	11
Joan	15
Philip	22
Maeve	16
Sample Mean (SD)	16.13 (4.64)
Cut-Off Score	35.4

Connection with Self

Whereas the second four skills in the Proactive Approach theme are more practical, the four skills that comprise the theme Connection with Self are more psychological. They derive from a basic sense of being in relationship with oneself—of paying attention to the self, taking care of the self, enjoying being in the company of the self, and engaging in introspective emotional and cognitive processes that serve to strengthen a connection with the self. This superordinate theme can best be summed up by a passage from Audrey, who described her experience with solitude using multiple metaphors for connecting deeply with herself:

Solitude allows me to hear my, hear my voice, hear myself think, and concentrate on what I'm feeling and what I need and it, it, it purifies me. It purifies me, it, it's either like being well fed or drinking the purest water, it, it

feels very healthy, it feels like I, I'm eliminating toxins and it's, it's like a warm embrace. It just feels like I'm yeah, I guess the best analogy is that I'm feeding myself and I just feel so content. And I guess for people who don't get it, it's, it's nourishment, it's nourishment to, to hear myself and to know what I feel and know what I need.

Audrey's words demonstrate this superordinate theme by stating clearly how solitude enables her to listen to herself, pay attention to her thoughts and feelings, and discern what she needs. She likens this experience of solitude to being physically healthy, feeling "purified" from such "nourishment." Clearly, she experiences enhanced well-being from time spent in solitude. The following sections describe in detail each of the four skills that comprise this theme of Connection with Self, which are arranged in no particular order of importance or sequence.

Enjoyment of solitary activities. Deriving joy and satisfaction from solitary pursuits was evident in these eight participants, who explicitly tied this skill to the ability to entertain themselves when alone. For these adults, boredom never or very rarely came up in solitude, and they explained the absence of boredom as a function of finding a plethora of interesting things to do in solitude. A conversation with Diana illustrated this skill:

D: I am never, ever bored in solitude.

I: Okay, tell me why.

D: Well, because in solitude I can follow whatever it is that is interesting. I find my thoughts interesting and if my thoughts aren't interesting well there's always a book, you know... and if I'm, if I'm not in a reading mood, well I can take a bath, or I could, you know, dance, or I could water the plants. I mean, I just, I, there's, there's nothing about being alone that's boring. There's plenty, plenty about being out in the world that I find boring.

Rather than seek stimulation in the external environment, Diana experienced the internal environment of solitude as a place to follow endlessly interesting thoughts and activities. Furthermore, she inverted the assumption that solitude was boring—instead, she portrayed the outer world as often boring. This utter lack of boredom with solitude was echoed by the other participants. In fact, surprised laughter was often their first response when I asked them if they were ever bored in solitude, followed quickly by a resounding “No.” For example, Joan remarked:

When I think about solitude, some of my solitude has been the furthest thing in the world from boring. You know, I have taken off in a small sailboat across an ocean completely alone ... I would say that boredom and being alone don't strike me as a natural pairing.

Rather than equating solitude with boredom, participants described a long history of this “natural pairing” of solitude with pleasure in solitary pursuits. For example, Philip said:

I was already such a creative kid and I was in my head with my imagination so I just kind of, I got so much out of that world and oftentimes I got more out of that world than I did from the world around me because the world around me wasn't as interesting... I kind of learned early on that being alone enabled me to really be where I wanted to be in the world of creativity and stuff.

Nora recounted that in college,

I wasn't afraid to explore things. Like I traveled on my own without knowing anybody, or—I wasn't afraid, I just wanted to try things ... and didn't feel like I needed desperately other people to do it with me or to do it—if I wanted to do it I'd just do it. So I think I've always had the capacity for solitude.

These participants described solitude as a place of creativity and exploration, where they could interact with their imaginations or the world at large—alone, happily, and without fear. Nora in particular attributed this skill to a capacity for

solitude. Perhaps a preference for solitude that is evident from an early age leads to repeated experiences of finding pleasure in solitary activities, so that by adolescence and early adulthood people seek out solitude because of this very reason. But if the ability to enjoy solitary pursuits is a skill, then presumably it can be taught and practiced by individuals who do not already have experience with it. The interviews intimated that this is indeed the case. Threaded throughout the interviews were speculations by the participants that families and society in general often socialize people away from solitude.

Matt, a native of Australia who has made the U.S. his home for the past twenty years, made this observation:

You know, I think people who have a lot, like in American culture, seem to get bored more than people who have almost nothing. Like they seem to have lost or never had the ability to entertain themselves, it's like they want other people to entertain them or society to entertain them.

Matt explicitly identified the ability to entertain oneself as a skill underpinning an experience of solitude that is not boring. Furthermore, he acknowledged society's role in hindering this ability, and suggested that if people want to learn to enjoy solitude, they may need to step away from the ready-made entertainment available in the wider culture, and experiment with what they find intrinsically enjoyable. When I asked my participants what advice they would give to people who had very little experience with solitude but who were curious about trying it, their advice overwhelmingly centered on this skill. For example, Maeve advised to start, "with what feels interesting," and Philip suggested, "Try and do an hour of just being alone, no phone, no talking with anyone else, and just doing something that you enjoy for yourself."

These suggestions come with assumptions: first, that the individual in question knows what they enjoy, and second, that they are sufficiently connected with themselves to be able to “feel” what intrinsically interests them. Thus, this skill rests appropriately within the larger theme of Connection with Self.

Emotional regulation. This skill describes a willingness to experience difficult emotions that arise during solitude, and an ability to regulate emotions in a variety of ways that produce an eventual feeling of resolution. It also describes the ability to turn toward solitude for the purpose of regulating difficult emotions that arise while in the presence of others.

Participants experienced both positive and negative emotional states during their solitude experiences, but this skill centers on regulating the difficult emotions that emerged. These emotions were diverse, including grief, anger, loneliness, despair, confusion, and anxiety. For some, there was a predictable process that often occurred. First, difficult emotions surfaced very early in the solitude experience. Rather than abandon solitude and escape to the social world, these participants described diverse coping strategies—for example, sitting with the feelings and taking time to reflect on why they had emerged, allowing the feelings to envelop them until they ran their course, or doing something physically active as a way to either shake off the feelings (e.g. by taking a walk) or express them (e.g. by dancing the feelings). Participants echoed each other in sharing that these difficult emotions did not scare them nor discourage them from solitude. Rather, they embraced these emotions as opportunities to slow down and feel, and they respected the need to regulate their

emotions. For example, Diana described what typically happens to her during an experience of solitude:

D: I feel that I spend most of my regular life without having enough time to be really sad and that almost every time I'm alone I, the initial thing that happens is that I go through intense sadness and then, and then I proceed. ...

I: Was there anything in particular you felt like you did to work through the sadness, or did the sadness just go away on its own? Sort of, what happened to help you move forward to another state?

D: I think I thought, I thought through the sadness as far as it needed to go and then it just evaporated.

I: Okay.

D: And I've, I've often found that when I'm, when, when nothing seems to calm me and I realize, oh I just, I have this overwhelming need to be alone and so I say to my husband, oh my god you just need to go and do something with the kids this afternoon, I'm going to garden, that's just what I have to do. Then I will go out to garden and, oh my goodness I'll realize that it's, you know the anniversary of the death of one of my best friends, you know, like oh I didn't even think of that, and so then I'll garden and I'll feel kind of, you know overwhelmingly sad and I will think and think and think about that person. And then, and then it'll be over. But it, but it takes, it, it, it's insisting that I spend some time thinking about it.

Two important things are worth noting here. First, Diana exhibited the ability to experience difficult emotions – in this case it was sadness, but elsewhere in her interview she also provided examples of anger and anxiety. Her tolerance for these emotions is evidenced by the fact that she was comfortable allowing the emotions to be there, and did not feel the need to ignore them or distract herself from them. Quite the opposite: she regarded the emotion as a visitor to be treated with respect, a visitor who “insist[s] that I spend some time thinking about it.” Second, she exhibited the ability to process the emotion through to some resolution. At times this involved

cognitively reflecting on why she was sad and spending time recalling sad memories, as she did in the gardening episode. Other times it involved physical movement, such as freeform solitary dancing, to express the emotions fully until she regained emotional equilibrium. This was how she ended her solitude date for the study: “It was actually a pretty intense dancing session I think because I was coming out of the solitude, so all of those emotions were right on the surface. I did some happy dancing and I did some really angry dancing.” When I asked her to describe in more detail what she experienced during the dancing, she responded by saying:

D: (pause) Well, I felt when I started the dancing that I was very myself, which was a nice feeling.

I: And I’m sorry to stop you already, but I’m interested in that phrase you just said. Tell me about what does it mean to feel like yourself?

D: I suppose that there was an absence of chatter (laughs) in my head and that I was, I was just, my body interacting with the air and the light in the room... The chatter is inside of me and I know that, it is me. But it feels, you know, it’s, it’s, it’s the opinions, the voices, and the worries of a hundred other people. So, so when that quiets down it’s just me in my body, and, and my memories. So, I, I felt at first that I was just dancing, I felt very kind of loose and like myself. And then I, I kind of thought of, some kind of, some of my more traumatic memories came back to me and I was like, oh great, well I get to dance those too, because I’m right here and ready for them. And so I danced through those. And then I thought okay, you know, now I’m, now I’m ready to see the family.

Her story explicates the relationship between this solitude skill and the larger theme of Connection with Self, and this relationship appears dialectical. Diana’s connection with herself enabled her to identify her emotions in the first place. She noticed that she was sad, or angry, or anxious, and was not alienated by those feelings. She felt them to be an important part of her, one that was worth paying

attention to. Then, her ability to express those emotions and be with herself, “just me in my body, and, and my memories” resulted in her feeling “very myself,” unhampered by the noise of “the worries of a hundred other people.” In short, being connected to herself invited emotional expression, and that expression strengthened her connection to her self.

Participants were especially skillful at navigating loneliness, which they acknowledged could often come up during solitude. All participants articulated a clear distinction between solitude and loneliness, with solitude described with positive adjectives such as “full,” “rich,” and “nourishing,” whereas loneliness was without fail described in negative terms such as “empty,” “lacking,” and “stark.” They were attuned to noticing when their solitude turned into an experience of loneliness, and described how they worked through the loneliness to return to a more positive experience of being alone. Remarkably, very few participants shared that they broke their solitude by becoming social in order to drive away the loneliness. Instead, they were able to stay alone and work with the loneliness until the positive state of solitude was restored. For example, Audrey shared:

If I’m lonely and I need to get back to the solitude I might go out to the ocean for a long walk because there’s something about hearing the waves, seeing the waves, seeing those little birds scurry across the sand, just looking at the sand trying to find sand dollars, especially watching the waves, I find it very reassuring and then I just feel so much better and I can hear myself.

Audrey recognized her lonely state and could distinguish it from solitude, as evidenced by her phrase “get back to the solitude.” For her, loneliness acted as an intruder into the solitude environment, threatening to overtake it. Her solution was to

change her physical surroundings, in particular by going to the ocean, a place that shifted her perspective. By physically moving and immersing herself in the external world in a non-social way, Audrey was taken outside of herself—and outside of the self-absorbed state of loneliness—and back into connection with something larger than herself. The end result is that she was able to re-connect with herself (“I can hear myself”), and ultimately her mood shifted—she felt reassured and “so much better.” Loneliness evaporated and she was able to return to her state of solitude.

Introspection. These adults talked about solitude as an opportunity to take a step back from their everyday lives to reflect and gain insight about themselves. For example, solitude provided the chance for Nora to “get a new perspective on life” and served as time for reflection for Laurie “when I feel like there’s something I kind of want to think about or just kind of sit with for a while.” While related to the skill of emotional regulation, this capacity for introspection is distinct and warrants its own place at the table. Stories of emotional regulation sometimes, but not always, involved a process of introspection. Likewise, stories of introspection during solitude sometimes, but not always, included the need to regulate emotions. This skill of introspection can best be summed up by Maeve, who said:

How much are you fascinated by your own inner workings? I feel like I’m just sort of off the charts in that, you know, and that that’s one of the things that solitude does for me is it gives me a chance to look into you know, what I am, you know (laughs). And like my mom, my mom has no interest, she doesn’t like to be alone, she’s like, introspection only at the last resort.

Here, Maeve identified an interest in herself as an object worthy of study—a complex human being, with “inner workings” that invite contemplation and analysis. She

positioned her affinity for self-reflection as opposite of her mother, a woman whose dislike of solitude and avoidance of introspection appear inextricably linked.

The necessity of this skill was made most apparent when participants reflected on why some people avoid solitude. In a conversation about why people might be afraid to be alone, Matt said:

If you're alone, you've got to face yourself and there might be some issues you have in terms of, maybe it's a mid-life crisis or relationship, or whatever it is, might be some things you don't want to deal with. And so you stay busy to avoid that, right? But if you're on your own, for a couple of hours, it might be pretty hard to distract yourself enough.

Matt framed solitude as an environment free of the distractions of everyday life, and therefore one that allowed room for psychological “issues” to surface. He implied that people may be—consciously or not—staying busy to avoid thinking about the bigger picture of their lives, and the potentially difficult decisions they need to wrestle with. Although solitude may invite opportunities to reflect on personal dilemmas, unless an individual has the capacity to self-reflect so that insight is gained, negative feelings like anxiety may be all that occurs in response to thinking about such dilemmas. But what does it mean to have a capacity for introspection? In short, it involves the ability to know oneself psychologically—to be curious about one's inner world, from motivations and behavior to beliefs and values. While insight about oneself can and does occur in the contexts of interpersonal relationships and conversations, participants made it clear that solitude was a powerful platform for self-reflection. My conversation with Philip illustrated this:

P: We are increasingly an extraverted society that does not, not only doesn't value, but I don't think our culture knows how to be alone anymore. Truly alone—there's no, I don't see really how anyone's really alone because even when you're alone, people distract themselves with their phones and their TVs and so I feel like there's no sense of real solitude and people's inner world and people knowing who they are anymore. Because you can't know who you are if you don't spend time completely alone with yourself.

I: Say more about that.

P: Well, I'm disturbed by it, I don't know, I think it's going to have a really bad effect on us. We cannot be alone anymore.

I: So what do you think it is about solitude that is so helpful to people in general that they're missing right now?

P: Because that's—I think you really get in touch with what's going on inside of you, how you're feeling, who you are, what your opinions are, what your beliefs are, knowing how you react to things, yeah, your internal values, your internal—knowing just everything about yourself that has nothing to do with other people's reactions or who they are. But if we're all just plugged into each other, there's so much other noise that's intruding on listening to yourself, your own instincts, your own feelings. It's like you lose that if you're not spending time alone.

Philip's description of knowing "who you are" was framed as an outcome of solitude, specifically an outcome of introspection during solitude. Being alone did not automatically lead to insight; rather, solitude provided an opportunity to "get in touch" with what he viewed as valuable aspects of himself. Importantly, he held these aspects—values, beliefs, and feelings—as non-social; they had "nothing to do with other people's reactions or who they are." He made a grand claim when he said, "You can't know who you are if you don't spend time completely alone with yourself." His claim rested on the assertion that external influences from others inhibited an authentic understanding of oneself. Other people were, in fact, "intrusions" to knowing one's true self, and there was a risk of losing that self if solitude was

neglected. This is reminiscent of Diana's desire, shared in the previous section, to escape the "chatter" in her head of "the opinions, the voices, and the worries of a hundred other people" in order to get in touch with her own authentic feelings.

Although Philip acknowledged elsewhere during his interview that humans are social creatures and in fact portrayed himself as a very sociable person, he seemed to view his truest self as something inherently individual, and accessible in its most authentic form when engaged in solitary introspection.

Noticing and heeding internal signals to enter solitude. This final skill within the larger theme of Connection with Self involved a two-fold ability: first, the ability to notice internal cues, whether they be physical sensations or emotions, and interpret them as signals to enter into solitude or exit from it; and second, to act on those signals at the right times in order to avoid the negative states of overstimulation or loneliness, respectively. All participants talked about these cues, and their ability to recognize and act on them, or as Laurie remarked: "make note of them before rather than after." Even when a lengthy period of solitude was not possible in the moment, participants had learned how to cope by retreating into miniature solitude episodes.

For example, Philip said his internal cues felt like this:

I'll feel overwhelmed and I'll feel exhausted, I'll feel very drained, and I'll also get very resentful and I get very angry. I kind of experienced it this past week at work at one point and I stepped out to just go to the bathroom to calm down, just to breathe all of it, and just, I knew that was what was happening and I just kind of got—I breathed and just calmed down—this is what it is, you'll be fine.

Remarkably, the content of the cues did not vary much between participants.

Cues that signaled a need to enter solitude were primarily either feeling physically

exhausted and drained or irritable and grumpy, always due to an extended period of social participation—whether for work or play. Cues that signaled a need to exit solitude were also very similar: eventually, participants felt bored and restless, or they began to get lonely and desired social connection again. Sometimes they just felt that their time in solitude was “complete” and they felt ready to re-enter the social world.

It was clear from these participants’ stories that interpreting feelings of irritation or exhaustion in a timely and accurate way—that is, interpreting them as signaling social overstimulation—was a skill they learned over time. Maeve demonstrated this skill when she articulated the process of noticing cues to enter solitude and subsequently to exit it. Our conversation is featured here at length, as it illustrates how this skill is crucially related to the overarching theme of Connection with Self.

M: If I’ve just been too much in motion in the world with a lot of people and too much stimulation, I just know that, I feel all of a sudden, I’ll recognize it, I already feel like it’s here and that I’m about to have a meltdown. So I’ve learned like at that point, I’ve learned to recognize the early warning signs of [I’m] going to have a meltdown, right, and like if it’s whatever it is, I start to notice that I feel overwhelmed, I start to complain about my surroundings, I start to tell myself stories about how bad everything is. I’m like, I know what’s happened here, I’ve just been getting too tired, I’m getting too far away from myself and I just need some time, I need to get out, I need to go for a walk in nature by myself, whatever. So, I think it’s you know either that I’m feeling over-stimulated or that I’m feeling like for whatever reason I haven’t really been attending to, you know, myself on a spiritual or creative level with those things.

I: And so have you ever experienced where, you know, so you’ve got these warning signals, you know you’ve been over-stimulated, overextended, and you need to be alone. What happens if you are somehow prevented or don’t give yourself the time you need to be in solitude, what happens to you then?

M: Oh God, it's really ugly (both laugh). It really, it really, really isn't good. ... What happens to me, I, I get really irritable, I get excessively irritable, and just like, short with situations and I just start to feel like I, I just don't feel like a rational person anymore, I feel like I can't properly process things in a way. It's just like my, my system of being able to respond well in relationships and process information, like literally my system just shuts down, I don't really know how else to say it. I just can't, I just can't feel—period, you know, and I do, I will keep going as long as I can but it feels like it comes at a really high, it feels like it comes at a really high cost, you know.

There is a lot to unpack in this excerpt. First, her use of the term “warning signs” indicated that these feelings of irritation and overwhelm serve as a form of self-protection. Their purpose was to stave off a “meltdown”—a state of impaired emotional and cognitive functioning. If she heeded these warning signs in time and took the appropriate action of removing herself from the social world and retreating into solitude, then she was able to return to a balanced state. If she didn't, there was “a really high cost,” which she described in dire terms. Second, she identified two common triggers for this system of warning signs: over-stimulation in the outside world and lack of contact with her inner world of creativity and spirituality. Both triggers can be construed as a lack of connection with the self. Being in “too much motion with the world” was followed by the acknowledgement that she has gotten “too far away from myself” – for her, these went hand-in-hand. Another form of getting too far away from herself came from neglecting her spiritual or creative needs, and this again directly related to a lack of connection with her self. Third, the level of detail and elaboration in this conversation indicated that Maeve was very familiar with this sequence of events. Not only has it occurred multiple times in her life, she has taken the time to break it down into its parts and decode their meanings. She

understands what the signals are, what they mean, and the consequences of ignoring them. A long process of learning has taken place, resulting in the cultivation of this skill and the ability to articulate it clearly. When I commented to her that it appeared that she was in tune with her need for solitude, she immediately had a self-deprecating comeback: “Yeah, that’s only taken fifty years (laughter).” This comment spoke volumes about the long process of learning how to read her inner signals effectively.

Finally, it is worth listening to Maeve describe the corresponding process of paying attention to internal cues that signal a need to exit solitude. For her these cues were more subtle, and suggest a highly advanced skill of paying close attention to one’s inner states.

I’ll get restless when I’m alone and sometimes I’ll be like, is this restlessness because I’m interested in going deeper in my own process with myself? Or is this restlessness—because like if I, if I get restless and I haven’t felt like I really settled with myself then I think that I’m okay, it’s not really the sign that I have to go out and be with people. But you know, if I’ve been alone a while and I feel like I’ve come to a subtle placement that sort of—I first just wait to see what happens and then you know, that, that, what feels like a really natural urge just to get out and connect more comes to me.

Maeve has learned not only to recognize the feeling of restlessness as a signal to exit solitude, she has also learned to distinguish between two types of restlessness. She interpreted one type as signaling a need for a deeper experience of connecting with herself in solitude, and the other type as signaling a readiness to connect socially. She was especially in tune with “a really natural urge just to get out and connect” that she trusted as a valid cue to exit solitude. Presumably this is in contrast to a “non-natural” urge to be social that is suspect—the first type of restlessness she

described. Such discernment represents an advanced capacity of this skill. It also demonstrates the inter-relatedness of the four skills in this theme Connection with Self: accurately interpreting inner cues that signal a need for solitude depends on a certain capacity for introspection and emotional awareness, and is grounded in a basic pleasure in solitary pursuits, thus enabling a person to recharge, be creative, gain perspective, or fulfill whatever motivation is driving their need for solitude. As will become evident in the next section outlining the last four skills, these first four skills appear to be essential in maintaining participants' psychological well-being *as well as* their positive relationships with others.

Proactive Approach to Solitude

Altogether, the first four skills derive from and contribute to a strong connection with the self—a connection that appears vital for these participants' well-being. However, participants' well-being depended on them being able to secure time in solitude and use it wisely. The next four skills can be described as comprising a *Proactive Approach* to solitude. This approach entails carving out time for solitude on a regular basis, negotiating with important people in one's life to acquire that alone time, and using that time mindfully and constructively. Finally, finding the right balance of solitude and socializing—a ratio which was unique to each person—is a necessary proactive skill for maximizing the psychological benefits of solitude.

Carving out time for solitude. In order to glean the benefits of solitude and avoid the negative effects of insufficient time alone, participants expressed the need to be disciplined and strategic about having solitude on a regular basis. Some of these

participants were more skilled at doing so, and those who longed for more routine time alone indicated that this was a skill they needed to practice. This latter sentiment occurred mainly for those participants who had family obligations, and whose time was often taken up with childcare or partner needs.

For example, Matt is married and is father to a ten-year old daughter, and as he reflected on the solitude date he undertook for this study he said:

I mean, I would say the main thing is that I saw it as this treat, you know like here's the chance to really do something that I want to do that's for me, and part of what that made me realize is how rare it is, and it made me wonder, well do other people who enjoy solitude, do they really make an active effort to do this kind of thing more often? Do they maybe have a, even a daily schedule where they have a couple of hours a day that is alone time and their families or friends or whatever know that, and allow for that? It kind of made me think about how could I do this more often, how could I do things differently. You know, what is fair to the people in my life, you know.

Matt made this skill apparent by discussing his relative lack of it. Using words like "active effort," and families and friends who would "allow for that" indicated his realization that solitude didn't have to be relegated to a rare "treat." Furthermore, Matt acknowledged that to experience solitude more frequently required a proactive approach, which he could envision because he described it in great detail. His next step was to make that happen for himself, a desire he repeated more than once during his interview.

Other participants showcased the mastery of this skill, describing ways in which they were disciplined about it or had learned how to be strategic with it. Audrey featured the disciplined form of this skill when she described her experiences of solitude. Early in the interview she said of herself, "I'm a very disciplined person."

This quality was apparent when she shared this memory of securing time for herself as a young adult:

A: I know that after college, in my twenties I started drawing, I would draw every night for four hours and so I think I would rearrange friends around that time. Because I'd say, well I have to draw, I need to draw for four hours, I have to draw, I spend every night drawing for four hours, and so I can't see you tonight. (laughs)

I: And was that always easy for you to say? Or was it difficult?

A: I think it was pretty easy. It's just this thing that I did and it was like feeding, yeah, like I said feeding myself. I had to, I had to do this thing for four hours.

Audrey's story suggests that the skill of carving out solitude time came naturally to her, perhaps because it was rooted in her conception of solitude as a basic need, similar to "feeding" herself. She frequently described solitude as "nourishment" and as an experience akin to being "well fed." For her, carving out four hours every night to draw in solitude was as necessary as eating dinner. Thus, it was "pretty easy" for her to reject social invitations or "rearrange friends" around her solitude, for in return she was able to feel the satisfaction of a basic need being met.

In a similar fashion, Nora described obtaining her solitude time in a no-nonsense manner: "It's like you really need that time and when you really want to do something that means something to you, you want to make that a priority, and it becomes a way of life, a habit, a practice, so it's a lifelong practice."

Other participants spoke about carving out solitude time as something they had to be strategic about. For example, Diana, a mother of two boys, said:

The first ten years of my marriage, I worked nights and my husband worked days. That's how I dealt with it. And then I got pregnant ... I loved being

home with my kids, and then a few years into it, we would, every night we would have a family dinner and I started going out of my mind, and I thought, what's my problem? Why do I find this unbearable? And it suddenly occurred to me that never in my relationship with him had I had to have dinner with him every single night. So, that was, that was pretty hard to realize and then, just because of my work, then I went back to teaching at night and I joined some writing groups, and every time I get hired to do an extra teaching gig it was always at night. So I have, now I'm out you know, a couple nights a week which just breaks up the week enough for me, and it buys me my day times, that I have time during the day when I'm alone.

Diana described how she had originally found a satisfying arrangement working nights so that she could be alone in the house during the day while her husband was at work. This strategy worked only until she had children. Not only did her daily solitude radically shift to accommodate taking care of her children during the daytime, she felt overwhelmed by the routine of a family dinner every evening. Thus, she had to re-strategize. She scheduled every teaching opportunity or group activity to occur during the family dinner time, and once her children were in school, her night teaching once again “bought” her the daytime solitude. This sequence of events showcased her ability to prioritize solitude and be strategic about acquiring it—even at the expense of time with her family. She recognized that this strategy goes against female gender norms in Western culture: “I also think that as a woman, wanting to be alone is suspect. And you know that you're considered a bitch basically if you aren't interested in giving all the time.” Despite society's portrayal of solitude as “a flaw” and the negative connotations for women—especially mothers—who want to be alone, Diana displayed persistence about securing solitude for herself.

Negotiating the need for solitude with important others. The previous skill of carving out time for solitude on a regular basis is made easier if the important

people in one's life support this strategy. For some participants, their partners or friends made it easy for them to secure solitude. As Laurie said:

It's not like I consciously ask someone that (laughs), you know when I'm meeting them it's like, okay I can't be friends with this person, or—but I do think, when I think about most of my close friends that I think about, especially my husband, there is a common thread there of people who are, who are comfortable being alone. And I think that does make it easier then to say to them, you know what, if you don't mind, I just, I really need the night to myself. Most of my friends would say, "Absolutely, no problem."

For Laurie the skill of negotiating for time in solitude was not onerous—her friends were also "comfortable being alone" and so they understood and supported her own need for solitude. But for most participants, such understanding did not come easy.

Thus, they had to cultivate this skill over time. For example, Maeve said:

I know how hard that was for me in the past. It was really hard for me to be in a relationship with someone, with people who did not get it, just needing to be alone, they would just really, took it personally and I wasn't even probably so graceful about how I explained it or need to ask for it or set the boundaries you know so it was really tough . . . I ended so many relationships because I couldn't figure out how to negotiate how badly I needed time for myself.

Components of this skill are evident in Maeve's description of how she failed in past relationships to successfully obtain time in solitude. Unlike Laurie, whose friends and husband related to the need for solitude, Maeve found herself in relationships with people who "did not get it" and who in fact "took it personally" when she spent time alone. Converting an unsupportive relational or social environment into one of support requires the ability to negotiate, which in Maeve's words involved three things: "explain" the need for solitude, "ask for it," and "set the boundaries." For Maeve, when this skill was absent, her typical response was to end the relationship.

My conversation with Matt underscored the need for this skill when he shared how he began to realize how his preference for solitude was being perceived by other people:

M: When I was younger, when I was getting to know people I'd say that I only met a couple of times or whatever, they might think I was aloof or felt I was too good for them or whatever because I wasn't sticking around in the main group. You know going off by myself might have been perceived as some kind of rejection, like I wasn't interested in them or what they were talking about.

I: Do you think you were aware of it in the moment those times? Or only thought about it later? That they might have been thinking those things about you.

M: Not when I was much younger, not when I was probably like eighteen, nineteen. Like I don't, like people would say things to me later like, oh like—once you got to know them—like oh we thought you were really shy or we thought you were stuck up or whatever. So I hadn't been aware initially that I was creating that impression. But once I heard that a few times, then I was aware of it and I was like, okay this is what they might think, and so you kind of make an effort to explain yourself. This is why, why I go off, it's not, I'm not depressed, I'm not sad, I just feel more comfortable in a smaller social setting.

I: So did it cause you to—

M: (overlap) And you know—

I: (overlap) change your behavior or just explain yourself better?

M: More about just making sure people knew, that you know, you'd explain yourself. I don't think the behavior has really changed, but more often awareness that it might be misinterpreted. You know, if you feel like it's being misinterpreted make sure people know.

Solitude is not enacted in an individualistic bubble, and in this conversation Matt acknowledged that his desire for solitude affected, and was affected by, others in his life. At first, his frequent, unexplained solitary behavior gave a negative impression to peers, who perceived him as “stuck up” or “really shy” – even possibly

“depressed.” These negative assumptions suggest two things. First, because Matt had failed to explain his behavior—presumably because he didn’t realize he needed to—his desire for solitude was a mystery to his friends. Late adolescence and early adulthood are typically highly social periods of life, and to not participate frequently in social events can signal deviation from the norm, and this deviation prompted these peers to speculate about Matt’s personality and mental state. Second, the negative impressions these peers arrived at are consistent with the deficit model of solitude held in U.S. culture and in Matt’s native Australia, where extraversion and social skills are highly valued and expected (Cain, 2012). Upon realizing that he was misinterpreted, Matt learned that to ward off future misunderstandings, he needed to “make an effort to explain” his desire for solitude. Years later, he found that explaining himself was not sufficient. Marriage and fatherhood introduced the need to negotiate:

I think it’s one of those things that you go through negotiations or you go through like an evolution in terms of how you deal with it in a relationship. I think [my wife] is more you know understanding of that need now than ever, like you know, the longer we’ve been together the more she’s realized you know this is just who he is, this is just something he needs, and she understands that it’s good for me and so therefore it’s good for us. Right, like I’ll be better to be around, right, we’ll both be happier if I get some time—but it’s always a negotiation because she wants the opposite, right.

Matt viewed negotiations with his wife for solitude as a necessary aspect of not only meeting his own needs for happiness, but also ensuring a happier marriage. Even though his wife wanted “the opposite” – more time together – she understood that solitude was good for him, and that it would therefore benefit her and their relationship. Matt had come a long way from being unaware of how his solitude

affected other people, to taking a proactive approach with close others in his life to ask for and explain his needs for solitude. In so doing, he averted misinterpretations and gained the benefit of an understanding partner.

Being mindful of how time in solitude is spent. What does it mean to use solitude constructively? This skill describes the measures participants took to make their time in solitude “well spent,” rather than “wasting” it, to quote Philip. For them, constructive solitude was dependent on being mindful that their time alone was volitional, uninterrupted, and intentional—which included being free of distractions, especially the Internet.

Solitude was defined by participants as time freely chosen by them, in which they were under no obligations for work or to interact with other people. As a college professor, Matt explained to me how spending six hours alone grading essays was not to be confused with time spent in solitude:

In those situations it's an obligation, it's, I'm doing something I have to do, it's part of my job. And it often is kind of the transaction of it's taking my energy, right ... versus if I had alone time that I was spending exactly how I want to spend it, as I did yesterday, then it's almost like I'm getting energy from that. Like it's rejuvenating me, I'm feeling relaxed, I'm content, I'm happy, as opposed to this process is gradually tiring me out.

As Matt explicated so well, being physically alone was not the equivalent of time in solitude. For him, solitude was rejuvenating because he could freely choose his activities. Thus, volition in the solitude experience seems vital to reap the benefits.

In most cases, participants shared that they worked hard to prevent other people from interrupting them, whether it be retreating to a secluded place or asking people not to call them during a certain part of the day. However, the more difficult

aspect of securing uninterrupted solitude was monitoring their own propensity to interrupt themselves—for example, checking email and social media, or answering a phone call instead of letting it go to voicemail. Audrey attributed her lack of interruptions while in solitude to being mindful about what she wanted in the moment:

I don't get interrupted very often and (pause) and I think that I'm, I try to pay really close attention to how I'm feeling because if I'm feeling in a moment, if I'm feeling in a time of solitude it feels like, like there's this cushion around me and, and so I can say, okay I have this cushion around me, now is a good time to, to just end up writing or draw or play music. And then I, then if I want to call somebody, I really have to say to myself, okay if you call this person, you're going to break out of the solitude and you know, you just have to be aware that it might take a little while to get back into it.

Audrey's description of solitude as a "cushion around me" suggested that her time alone was a protected space, cushioning her from interruptions to her creative work. She realized that if she followed a fleeting feeling to call someone, it would cause her to "break out of the solitude" – a turn of phrase that evoked abruptness and force, and also implied that such breakage could make her focused, creative solitude experience difficult to reconstruct.

Finally, the skill of being mindful involved participants entering the space of solitude with clear intentions about what they wanted to experience or accomplish, and not allowing themselves to get distracted by meaningless activities. These distractions especially included references to the Internet and social media. Maeve described how she distinguished whether her solitude was "worthy" or not:

Sometimes you know, I just want to lie on the couch and watch a movie but I do know like if I go too far with that like, there's a certain way in which distractions take me into that disconnected place in myself and I start to feel

like ... too many distractions in my solitary time just kind of makes me feel stupid. I really feel like part of the reason that I need solitude and part of the way that solitude can be so helpful for me is that because, it's because it allows me to go more deeply into things that are truly meaningful to me on like a spirit and soul level, and I don't, I don't just like to throw that time away... You could say that sort of there's that quality connection and there's just the sort of mindless zoning out which I'm really susceptible to ... like yesterday, yesterday in my day it took me until the middle of the afternoon to feel like I was really leaning into like, oh yeah this is what, you know, this is the best of what solitude does for me, right. This is where the treasure really is, you know. ... It didn't use to be that so many distractions were available when one was alone right? Like you were alone and you didn't have the entire, you know, Internet universe at your fingertips, right.

Although her time in solitude might be volitional and uninterrupted, Maeve was aware that engaging in certain activities—from watching movies to getting on the Internet—did not always result in satisfaction. Instead, such aimless activities made her feel “mindless,” “disconnected,” and “stupid,” as if she’s “throw[ing] the time away.” These distractions prevented her from experiencing “the treasure” that she valued most in solitude: deep, meaningful connection with her creative and spiritual life.

Balancing the needs for solitude and sociability. This final skill involved creating a healthy balance of time in solitude versus time in the social world. Crucially, it invoked the ability to be proactive in accessing close interpersonal and social relationships when solitude began to feel isolating. Philip was acutely aware of the need for an intact social circle to background his solitude:

If I have satisfying connections with people that are happening actively at the time, both friendships and maybe potentially, I don't know, romantic or otherwise, I feel like it's okay to step away from it because it's there and I know it's there and it's not going to go away.

Experiencing satisfying friendships and intimate relationships created a feeling of security for Philip. Specifically, the security of social belonging facilitated his ability to be alone. He displayed confidence that his relationships wouldn't disappear if he temporarily retreated into solitude, and he recognized that he had opportunities for socializing when he wanted them. A functioning social community may very well be what allows people to safely experience long periods of solitude, where they can engage in deeply creative, restorative, or otherwise satisfying experiences and then resurface into a community that welcomes them back.

Having this community in place was especially important for participants who lived alone. For example, Joan has lived by herself by choice for many years, but recognized her need for close connection with others. She is especially close to her sister, who lives overseas. Thus, they have a standing date to talk via Skype every week, and this predictable connection ameliorated the loneliness that could arise from her solitary living situation. As Joan said: "Because I'm alone I need to remember the resources I have for companionship. Yeah, make sure that I access them because it's very easy for me to be alone and on a long-term basis it's not good for me. We are social creatures." Joan summed up this skill very well when she used the phrase "the resources I have for companionship." She not only accurately recognized human companionship as a necessary ingredient in her relationship with solitude, she proactively set aside the time to connect with her sister so that she experienced satisfying social connection.

Maeve also recognized the importance of cultivating this skill after years of living alone and experiencing longer stretches of solitude.

What I've found as I've gotten older is I've been able to find these ways of settling really much deeper into periods of solitude, but one of the things that helps so much for me to sustain that is to appreciate, that is, to understand I'm not alone ... When I know that I'm going to be having time alone, the whole day or a stretch of days, I actually, I will, will build things in, where it's, I'm just reaching out to a trusted person on the phone or I will go out and do stuff like go to my yoga class or just go and take my, my laptop and work in a café ... And even just that very act of going out for a walk where I'm mostly by myself but I ran into five people I know, and it makes me feel like I'm still rooted like in place where I am and I'm not alone, just that little bit of connection can just sort of spark something in me where I feel like it's not too hard, you know, it's not too hard to be alone ... I don't often need a lot, like little sips will do it.

Similar to Joan, Maeve worked to proactively “build things in” that created a balance of solitude and sociability. For example, when she took a break from solitude to take a walk, “[I] ran into five people I know.” Such dependable social intervals rescued solitude from feeling “too dry, too spare,” according to Maeve. She was not unique among participants with her honest discussion that sometimes solitude could be difficult—even when chosen. But regular, satisfying doses of social connection helped her feel like “it's not too hard to be alone.”

As the above examples demonstrate, having an intact social circle creates feelings of belonging that ward off potential feelings of loneliness or isolation during solitude. One can take “little sips,” as Maeve said, of social connection to balance out long stretches of volitional solitude. The ameliorative effects of sociability on solitude seemed to also work the other way around. Participants valued time in solitude because it facilitated their ability to form and maintain successful relationships with

others. For example, Audrey noted, “I can’t be with people effectively unless I’ve spent time in solitude,” and Laurie said, “my solitude helps my interactions.” But how does solitude actually accomplish this? Laurie elaborated by saying:

[Solitude is] how I kind of recharge, and I think if I’m feeling, if I’m feeling overwhelmed or if I feel I don’t have enough time for myself or cranky, then I will be cranky and I will be sort of brusque . . . I just don’t want to really be around people. Whereas if I’ve had some solitude, yeah, I think it does [help]. Because then when I’m around people I’m glad to be around people.

Laurie’s words make clear the dynamic relationship between solitude and sociability: when a person has become overtaxed by the social world, a retreat into solitude is rejuvenating and emotionally regulating. Sufficiently restored, a person can re-enter the social world better equipped to relate positively with others, and is genuinely “glad to be around people.” Thus, retreating into solitude can itself be viewed as a proactive approach that facilitates positive relationships with others.

Finally, the self-understanding one gains in solitude improves the capacity to relate with others. Maeve commented that in solitude she is “able to come to the deeper understanding of myself so that then I can be, like I said, a person in the world and be in connection with people in ways that feel rewarding and useful, you know, and not just reactive and anxious.” Maeve suggested that the insight she gained about herself in solitude alleviated her anxiety and over time decreased her tendency to be “reactive” in relationships. Moreover, her comment makes apparent the inter-relation of the various solitude skills. In this case, the skills of introspection and emotional regulation, which promote a Connection with Self, come full circle with this skill of balancing solitude and social relationships.

Discussion

Prior to this study, the existence of a set of solitude skills was mentioned in the psychological literature as a theoretical possibility but never empirically investigated (Byrnes, 2001; Galanaki, 2005; Rook, 1988; Rubenstein & Shaver, 1982). Although the present study sampled adults, some of the findings align with Byrnes' (2001) speculations of the skills children need in order to benefit from solitude. For example, she suggested children need to develop an ability for introspection and be able to surmount initial feelings of anxiety that may surface when alone. The adults in this study robustly demonstrated skills in these two areas. In addition, Byrnes recommended that children be able to distinguish between loneliness and solitude. Once again, the participants in this study clearly differentiated between the two states, and had the ability to emotionally navigate through loneliness until a positive state of solitude was restored.

However, such skills are not acquired instantly. On the contrary, my conversations with participants indicated that these skills were typically cultivated over time and through a sometimes difficult process of learning. The word *skill* denotes the ability to undertake difficult work and do it with expertise. As Maeve acknowledged, "It's hard to be alone sometimes." There are many potential reasons for solitude being difficult, but lack of practice is certainly one of them. To return to the data for a moment, the following story illustrates the discomfort—even "terror"—that comes with experiencing solitude for the first time. Here, Diana recounted the first memory she had of being alone:

D: I remember my first, the first time I wanted to be alone ... We were on our way to something really fun, like the circus or something and there were four kids and we were all crammed in the car and I just started feeling like oh I didn't want to go... I was able to verbalize that I didn't want to go and my mother just was very surprised and said that I could stay home if I really felt that way. And I said that I did. And so she took me back home and let me into the house, I think I was about nine or ten, and they left and I instantly became terrified, because you know we lived in this big house and I'd never been alone in it. And so I went and I sat under my desk and pulled the desk chair in to close myself into my desk and then I took, I took like my blanket, and some books and a coloring book and all kind of stuff and I was like oh yeah, I am set!

I: (laughs)

D: You know, like, I asked for this and now I have it, and it's a little scary but it's totally worth being scared because now I can do whatever I want in my little, you know, nest or cocoon under the desk.

In this story, Diana articulated her discovery of the joys of solitude. The desire for solitude emerged originally as an attempt to escape a social activity with her family. When she got what she wanted and was unexpectedly left to her own devices, the unfamiliarity of the situation evoked a kind of primal fear. Imagine her as a small child, alone for the first time in a big house, devoid of all the usual noise and activity that a big family creates. This initial empty state of aloneness was experienced negatively—she “instantly became terrified.” For comfort, she created a cocoon under her desk and surrounded herself with familiar objects. Soon, the presence of these objects triggered the realization that she now had the freedom to “do whatever I want,” without interruption or pressure from others. This autonomy opened her up to a new world of solitude—one that was worth overcoming her initial fear. Importantly, the initial emptiness of being alone was replaced with a fullness, filled with pleasure, activity, and contentment. Learning to enjoy solitude and use it constructively is

indeed a learning experience, one that may take time, practice, and the willingness to move past initial feelings of fear, loneliness, or boredom.

Theoretical Contributions

Solitude as a biological need. Alone theory asserts that being alone is a biologically based need necessary for the regulation of stimuli (Buchholz, 1997). My participants were attuned to inner signals, such as exhaustion and irritability, to protect themselves from the negative effects of overstimulation. As Philip described, “I’ll feel overwhelmed and I’ll feel exhausted, I’ll feel very drained.” They frequently used their time in solitude to emotionally regulate and physically recover from what they perceived to be excessive social contact. The need for such recovery supports Buchholz’s claim that a need for solitude is partially biological, and lack of solitude thus can likewise have biological effects. For example, Maeve described the experience of overstimulation in holistic terms, affecting her physically, emotionally, and cognitively: “I get excessively irritable... I just don’t feel like a rational person anymore... my system of being able to respond well in relationships and process information, like literally my system just shuts down.” For Maeve, ignoring these signals came with “a really high cost,” with negative effects on her physical and psychological well-being. If one of the functions of solitude is indeed to regulate stimuli and promote homeostasis, then recognizing inner cues signaling the need for solitude is a crucial skill for self-regulation and utilizing solitude constructively. It is worth noting that regulation of stimuli occurred in the opposite direction as well; participants knew when they needed to emerge from their solitary state because they

were able to interpret restlessness and loneliness as signaling a need for more social stimulation, rather than less.

Solitude's role in identity and intimacy. Alone theory also asserts that solitude is a socio-emotional need necessary not only for identity development but also for the capacity for genuine intimacy (Winnicott, 1958). The solitude skills of introspection and emotional regulation seem to facilitate identity development so that, in the words of Philip, "You can't know who you are if you don't spend time completely alone with yourself." Furthermore, participants credited their time in solitude to promoting success in relationships. Audrey echoed the sentiments of multiple participants when she said, "I can't be with people effectively unless I've spent time in solitude." It makes good theoretical and practical sense that experiencing the salutary effects of solitude would facilitate positive relations with others. Many of these solitude skills include corresponding benefits; for example, the capacity for emotional regulation increases the probability that a person will experience the benefit of emotional balance after being in solitude, having had the opportunity to process difficult feelings. This is consistent with research showing a rebound effect in mood after spending time alone (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982). Thus, re-entering the social world after feeling emotionally rejuvenated would likely have a positive effect on relationships with family and friends. For example, rather than being "reactive and anxious" in her relationships, spending time in solitude allowed Maeve to "come to the deeper understanding of myself" and therefore "be in connection with people in ways that feel rewarding and useful."

These results are consistent with both lifespan and clinical models of development. The Eriksons' model of lifespan development placed identity formation as a task that preceded intimacy in their map of human development (Erikson, 1968; Erikson, 1997). They proposed that intimacy is only possible after identity formation was well underway, "true engagement with others" being the result of a well-defined self (Erikson, 1968, p. 167). Clinical viewpoints on solitude and loneliness concur with the Eriksons' position; it has been argued that comfort with being alone ought to precede relationships because it is a protection against emotional dependency (Koch, 1994), and clinicians have observed that a fear of being alone can sabotage relationships (Young, 1982). Finally, my findings indicate that a proclivity for solitude does not preclude forming and sustaining positive relationships with other people. This supports previous findings that comfort with solitude and social support are independent, additive sources of well-being (Larson & Lee, 1996) and is also consistent with Maslow's (1970) research on self-actualization, which indicated that highly self-actualized individuals prioritized their need for solitude just as much as their need for social connections.

Solitude indicative of a high solitropic orientation. All of the participants in this study exhibited the skill of enjoying solitary activities. This finding is consistent with research that has linked the frequency and enjoyment of solitude experiences with a high *solitropic* orientation, which denotes a high desire to engage in solitary activities, rather than with a low *sociotropic* orientation, which denotes a low desire to affiliate with others (Leary, Herbst, & McCrary, 2003). In other words, people who

frequently choose to spend time in solitude are not avoiding others so much as feeling pulled to spend time by themselves doing activities they enjoy. For my participants, this desire to engage in solitary activities was linked with two things: the ability to entertain themselves and a notable absence of boredom. Furthermore, they demonstrated the tendency to become immersed in whatever they were doing—whether it be a creative project, an introspective process, or an appreciation for the beauty of their surroundings. This is consistent with Larson’s proposal that, “Solitude provides a situation that is suited to deep absorption” (Larson, 1990, p. 165). My participants seemed aware of solitude’s potential for such beneficial absorption, and the skill of being mindful ensured that they didn’t allow distractions or interruptions to interfere with their time in solitude.

Solitude as a promoter of eudaimonic happiness. Participants in this study did not always experience positive emotions during solitude. Frequently, their periods of volitional alone time included so-called negative emotions, such as grief, anxiety, or loneliness. Typically such emotions were experienced in the initial phase of solitude, giving participants the opportunity to exercise the skills of introspection and emotional regulation. As Diana described, “I feel that I spend most of my regular life without having enough time to be really sad and that almost every time I’m alone I, the initial thing that happens is that I go through intense sadness and then, and then I proceed.” Participants utilized various strategies to navigate these emotions, from physical movement to self-reflection, and shared stories of successfully moving through to a more emotionally balanced state. In Diana’s case, “I thought through the

sadness as far as it needed to go and then it just evaporated.” Another example comes from Audrey, who described sometimes feeling lonely during solitude. Taking a walk by the ocean helps her shift the loneliness, and “then I just feel so much better.”

These examples are consistent with Larson’s (1990) research over multiple adult and adolescent samples demonstrating that moods typically lowered during solitude but then rebounded to higher than normal levels upon exiting solitude. Taken together, these findings have two important and related implications. First, initial lowered mood states are a typical, expected phase of solitude, and second, an important function of solitude is to make contact with the inner world and facilitate emotional renewal. As Diana noted, stressful, busy lives often prevent us from pausing long enough to experience difficult emotions. With solitude comes an opportunity for suppressed thoughts and emotions to surface. This is in line with what Matt observed: “If you’re alone, you’ve got to face yourself and there might be... some things you don’t want to deal with. And so you stay busy to avoid that, right? But if you’re on your own, for a couple of hours, it might be pretty hard to distract yourself enough.” Thus, it may be that there are phases of solitude, similar to the phases outlined in restoration theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), in which one needs to cognitively and emotionally “declutter” before one can move into a restorative state. Some of the clutter may feel uncomfortable, and insight and mood regulation may be possible only if a person has the skills to move through these preliminary negative thoughts or inchoate emotions that arise when one is finally alone with oneself.

Moreover, participants’ examples of navigating such emotions during solitude

included the ability to stay in solitude even when it felt difficult. As Rilke (1934) reminded his readers, “It is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult” (p. 53). Despite this difficulty, my participants continued to choose solitude, as did the participants in previous research (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982). Larson & Csikszentmihalyi (1978) likened solitude to “a medicine which tastes bad, but leaves one more healthy in the long run” (p. 691). The findings from this dissertation support their speculation that the negative moods that surface during solitude may be masking important processes such as reflection, emotional release, creativity, and experimentation with different selves. Thus, it does appear that solitude functions less as a happiness promoter in the hedonic sense (i.e. feeling good, experiencing pleasant emotions) and more as a well-being promoter (i.e. gaining insight, experiencing the full spectrum of emotions) in the eudaimonic sense. The difficult work of emotional regulation and self-reflection performed in solitude may not make us feel “good” in the moment, but it may increase personal growth and meaning in life in the long run.

Solitude: A Relationship with the Self

The set of eight solitude skills that emerged from this study coalesced within two superordinate themes: Connection with Self and a Proactive Approach toward solitude. Together, these themes reveal what may be the fundamental function of solitude: to cultivate a relationship with the self. The skills of introspection, emotional regulation, enjoyment of solitary activities, and attunement to inner signals all serve to deepen a connection with the self. Furthermore, the proactive skills of carving out time, negotiating for solitude, using the time in solitude mindfully, and maintaining a

healthy balance of solitude and sociability, all encourage optimal conditions for a relationship with the self to develop.

Although this construct of a relationship with the self has not been highlighted in the empirical literature on solitude, it has emerged in the writings of thinkers who have reflected on the domain of solitude; for example, “The confrontation of the self, by the self, which is solitude’s true vocation,” wrote Sue Halpern (1992, p. 202) in her collection of essays on solitude. This dialectical relationship of the self interacting with the self is reflected in William James’ concept of the “I” and the “Me,” in which the “I” represents the self as knower, containing the qualities of self-awareness and agency, and the “me” represents the self as an object of knowledge (James, 1890). Viewed through this theoretical lens, solitary experiences can be read as experiences of relationship. For example, when Diana said, “I was very myself,” or when Audrey shared, “I can hear myself,” both of these women were describing experiences of solitude that facilitated a relationship with themselves that was authentic and attentive—the very same qualities that facilitate close relationships with others. For Nora, her very experience of self seemed to depend on time in solitude: “If I didn’t have solitude, I wouldn’t have me.” The relationship with self that is cultivated in solitude may be a foundational mechanism for other developmental processes, including autonomy (Brennan, 1982), self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2008), and identity (Larson, 1997).

This interpretation of solitude as a container that facilitates a relationship with the self contradicts the dire picture of solitude frequently painted by scholars who

research this domain. For example, in the Forward to the recently published *Handbook of Solitude*, Rubin (2014) introduced the concept of solitude not as a potentially active and beneficial psychological domain, but rather as simply the absence of social contact that results in “a nothingness, an emptiness, a void” (p. xiii). Rubin depicted individuals who have a preference for solitude as a “non-interacting minority ... who are positively inclined when in the company of inanimate objects,” and who display “unacceptable, discomfiting behavior” relative to a cultural ethos of interaction and cooperation (p. xiv). Rubin summarized his description of solitude as a state that can be “punishing, humbling, debilitating, and destructive” (p. xv).

The participants in this study evinced just the opposite. For them, solitude was full, not empty, and rewarding, not punishing. This fullness of solitude was reflected in the descriptors they spontaneously generated to describe their experiences: “full,” “a delight,” “luxurious,” “a treat,” just to name a few. Audrey described solitude as a place that was “very engaging,” where she felt “nourished.” Furthermore, participants did not perceive solitude as isolating. Maeve described solitude as an opportunity to “come to the deeper understanding of myself so that then I can be, like I said, a person in the world and be in connection with people.” Audrey said, “Solitude is my partner,” framing it as an “other” that she interacted with. All eight participants discussed the necessity of maintaining an optimal balance between their needs for solitude and for social interaction, and all demonstrated the proactive skills of staying connected to their close relationships and social communities to maintain that balance.

Although Rubin eventually acknowledged that “solitude may be an entirely acceptable pursuit” (2014, p. xv), he included the following provisos: “*If one spends alone time voluntarily, and if one can join a social group when one wants to, and if one can regulate one’s emotions (e.g., social fears and anger) effectively, and if one can initiate and maintain positive, supportive relationships with significant others, then the solitary experiences can be productive*” (p. xv). These conditions set forth by Rubin are consistent with the results of this study, as they tap three of the eight solitude skills: emotional regulation, balancing solitude with social needs, and being mindful that solitude is volitional. Thus, it would be reasonable to expect that a person who was well-versed in these skills would not be in danger of a solitude that, in Rubin’s terms, can be “ruinous” (p.xii). Rubin’s warnings about solitude seem to be pertinent for someone in a non-volitional state of aloneness, whereas my participants described their solitude as freely chosen. This is consistent with the corpus of studies on solitude conducted over the years which confirm that solitude is most constructive when engaged in by choice (Larson, 1990; Long & Averill, 2003). If their time in solitude became “too dry, too spare,” as Maeve put it, my participants possessed the skills to prevent the solitude from becoming an isolating or destructive experience. Importantly, not all solutions included a flight into the social world. Instead, participants demonstrated using their skills of introspection, emotional regulation, and ability to entertain themselves to go deeper into their solitude experience and reap satisfaction from it.

Rather than discouraging individuals from entering solitude, and ignoring the documented benefits of this volitional state of aloneness, I suggest that it is more productive to chart the territory of solitude, acknowledge the potential pitfalls of loneliness and isolation, and identify the skills necessary to navigate solitude successfully. The domains of social interaction and interpersonal relationships contain analogous pitfalls, carrying known risks of abuse, rejection, and loss, and yet scholars do not recommend that we avoid all relationships to avert such potential suffering. Similar to social relationships, solitude can be construed as an “experiential niche” filled with both opportunities and dangers, thus requiring skills in order to garner the benefits (Larson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Graef, 1982).

Limitations

The eight skills identified here come from a selective, small sample that may not apply generally to the population at large. For example, the solitude skills demonstrated by these adults may be developmentally constrained. Children may not have the cognitive capacity necessary for introspection, or the autonomy required to carve out time for solitude. The adults in this study were also employed and well-educated; they had access to access to private rooms and the autonomy to go places on their own. In short, they had space and freedom. Many people of all ages lack the ability to access space for solitude, whether due to poverty, displacement, housing situation, or untold other reasons. Such developmental and socio-economic factors need to be taken into consideration when theorizing or applying from this data set. Finally, this sample is composed of creative types. Do the same solitude skills emerge

in a different sample? I collected data with a second sample of adults who were recruited from a contemplative retreat center, all of whom had extensive experience with meditation, and when those data are analyzed it can be seen whether or not they converge with the findings from this sample of creative types. Once these results have been compared with data collected from populations that are diverse on variables such as age and socio-economic background, a more complete picture of solitude skills can begin to emerge. In short, this study marks the first but certainly not the last step in the nascent area of solitude skills research.

Future Directions

Findings from this research study represent important advances in alone theory: identifying solitude skills, which can eventually be mapped, described, and sequenced in the context of shifting developmental capacities over the lifespan. Although this research utilized a specific adult sample to identify solitude skills, a theoretical assumption—which needs to be tested empirically—is that these skills can be translated and adapted into developmentally appropriate skills for children, adolescents, and adults. One reason for the dearth of research on solitude prior to adolescence is the widely held assumption that children lack the cognitive skills required to benefit from the reflective processes that take place in solitude (Larson, 1990). However, this assumes that the primary function of solitude is identity development, an assumption that researchers hold (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999; Larson, 1997), and which clearly is not supported by the findings of this dissertation. These findings reveal two additional processes that occur during solitude: emotional

regulation and recovery from overstimulation. Thus, it seems reasonable that children and pre-adolescents could benefit from learning how to utilize solitude for these purposes.

Empirical questions about the efficacy of solitude skills can be explored by creating solitude skills curricula that can be incorporated alongside successful social skills curricula and testing their effects on outcomes such as emotional regulation, concentration, and well-being. These curricula can be applied in educational settings, in keeping with recommendations that students would benefit from silence and solitude during the school day (Byrnes, 2001; Galanaki, 2005). Solitude skills training can also be adapted to therapeutic settings; clinicians have already noted how the capacity for solitude could serve as a clinical intervention for patients who suffer from loneliness, depression, and poor relationships (Burke, 1991; Knafo, 2012; Young, 1982).

Finally, although individual differences such as extraversion likely play a role in how much solitude one prefers (Burger, 1995), the actual skills to utilize solitude constructively may not depend on individual differences. Research has shown that many expert behaviors typically attributed to innate personality characteristics are actually activities practiced by individuals, activities which are demonstrated and reinforced by the larger culture. These are called *repertoires of practice* (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), and denote experiential skills that are learned and practiced over time. This concept has two important implications for my research. First, viewed with this theoretical lens, utilizing solitude constructively is not a domain reserved for

introverts or individuals who “naturally” know how to use it. Rather, solitude becomes accessible for any individual who takes the time to practice and adapt various solitude skills to meet their particular needs or to achieve certain ends. Second, solitude skills may be difficult to acquire when one’s family and society do not value or practice solitude themselves. The four skills within the Proactive Approach theme may be particularly challenging to acquire for a person who lacks solitary role models or acceptance by family and friends of their desire for solitude. Training in solitude skills with the aid of an educational curriculum could therefore be quite useful for children and adolescents who lack supportive role models.

Conclusion

The results of this dissertation study make important contributions to alone theory. First and foremost, the identification of these eight solitude skills confirms what researchers have previously only speculated: individuals utilize a set of skills that enable them to benefit from time in solitude. How well these particular skills apply to other populations is a question worth testing empirically. In addition, my findings confirm several assertions about solitude in the psychological literature: that solitude is a biological need; that solitude supports identity development as well as intimacy with others; that a preference for solitude reflects a pleasure of solitary activities rather than an aversion towards people; and that solitude promotes happiness in the eudaimonic, rather than hedonic, sense. Finally, the two superordinate themes categorizing these solitude skills—Connection with Self, and a

Proactive Approach—converge to support what may be the fundamental function of solitude: facilitating a relationship with the self.

Investigating solitude skills is especially important at this cultural moment, a time when cognitive overload, distraction, and excessive utilization of social media are becoming more frequent in the lives of adolescents and adults. Empirically testing this preliminary set of solitude skills with other populations paves the way for creating and adapting solitude skills curricula for educational, clinical, and individual use. Perhaps then, fewer of us can be accused of having “no resources for solitude,” as Jane Austen’s character so succinctly stated, and more of us will benefit from Winnicott’s (1958) legendary term, the *capacity for solitude*.

APPENDIX A

Solitude Study
INSTRUCTIONS

1. Plan to spend one day by yourself (from the time you wake up until the time you fall asleep). During this time, if you choose to be in a public place, please keep your interactions and communication with others to a minimum. This will help keep the focus of the day on you.

SOLITUDE DATE:
MONTH/DAY _____

2. Before you spend your day alone, schedule a time for the interview (by phone, video chat, or in person). This interview should occur *after* your day alone, but ideally should be *no more than two days* after your alone day occurred. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes of your time.

DATE OF INTERVIEW: MONTH/DAY

3. At the end of your solitude date, before you go to sleep, jot down some notes about how you spent your day, using the sheet provided for you.
 - a. First, reconstruct the day according to the various experiences you had. Where were you? What did you do? How long did this last? I am interested in all your experiences, even the ones you think might be irrelevant.
 - b. Second, for each experience, jot down how you felt during it. Note that this is not how you feel about it *now*, but how you were feeling *then*.
 - c. Finally, for each experience, jot down anything you noticed about your thoughts or behaviors at the time.
4. You can use this sheet during the interview to help prompt your memory of what you experienced during your day alone. You do not need to submit these notes to the researcher. It is confidential and yours to keep. Be as honest as you can, and share what you are comfortable with during the interview.

PLEASE KEEP THESE NOTES TO REFER TO DURING YOUR INTERVIEW

Experience / Activity What Happened?	Approx. Time it Began	Approx. Time it Ended	Feelings during this Experience	Reflections on your Thoughts and Behaviors during this Experience

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

*Note: Questions marked with a * were asked of all participants. Other questions were asked on a case-by-case basis to elicit more in-depth description of their experiences.*

Introductions.

I want to get an insider's view of what it's like to spend time in solitude – your subjective experience. So I'm interested in the full range of your experiences – positive and negative, fulfilling and unfulfilling. Share anything that comes to mind as we talk, even if it seems minor or insignificant to you. The field of psychology knows very little about solitude and people who choose to spend time by themselves for periods of time.

First I'm going to ask you some general questions about the day you spent by yourself, and then some specific ones about the day. When we're finished talking about your solitude date, then I have a few questions about thoughts, feelings and experiences about solitude during your life in general.

Any questions before we begin?

- 1) Tell me about the day you spent in solitude for this study.*
 - a. How was your day alone similar or different from other days you've spent by yourself?
 - b. What were the main activities you did throughout the day? How satisfying were these to you?
 - c. Describe your emotions throughout the day. For example, how was your emotional state when you woke up? Mid-day? End of day?
- 2) Did you ever feel bored during your solitude date?*"
 - a. If yes, describe when, how long it lasted, and how you responded to your boredom.
 - b. Whether yes, or no, do you ever feel bored when you spend time in solitude in general? Past or present? Describe...
- 3) Did you ever feel lonely during your solitude date?*"
 - a. If yes, describe when, how long it lasted, and how you responded to your loneliness.
 - b. Whether yes, or no, do you ever feel lonely when you spend time in solitude in general? Past or present? Describe...

- 4) Did you ever feel any other negative or uncomfortable emotions during your solitude date? If yes, describe.
- 5) What positive emotions did you feel throughout the day? Describe when, how long they lasted, when they ended.
- 6) At the beginning of your solitude date, did you have any hopes, goals or expectations for the day?
 - a. If so, what were they?
 - b. Did those get met by the end of the day?
 - c. How do you feel about that?
- 7) What did you do, if anything, to prepare for the day alone? (Especially to prepare the people in your life)
- 8) How did you manage interruptions to your solitude—if there were any?*
- 9) Did you face any barriers to enjoying your day or using it constructively?*
- a. If yes, what were they and how did you respond?
 - b. If no, have there been solitude experiences in the past where you faced barriers?
- 10) Did you ever get to a point in the day where you were struggling to be alone? If so, what did you do to manage that?
- 11) Is there anything else that stands out to you about your solitude date that you want to share?

Now we'll spend some time talking about your thoughts and experiences of solitude in general, throughout your lifetime.

- 12) How would you describe the difference between solitude and loneliness?*
- a. How are you able to distinguish these states in yourself?
- 13) Can you describe for me one of your earliest memories of being in solitude? (First, let's make sure we have a working definition of "solitude." By that word, I mean time that you choose to spend alone, for whatever reason. You're alone because you want to, not because you feel forced to or because you have nothing else to do.)
 - a. (if experience was not by choice)... How about an early memory of being in solitude by choice?
- 14) In general, when you spend time by yourself, what motivates you to be in solitude?*

- 15) In general, what do you gain or benefit by your time in solitude?*
- 16) What happens if you don't get the time you need to be in solitude?*
- 17) Do you have any clues or signals that tell you that you need to be alone?* If so, what are they?
- 18) Do you have any clues or signals that tell you when you're finished with being alone?* If so, what are they?
- 19) How do the important people in your life respond to your desire to be alone—and respond to the actual time you take to be alone?*
- 20) What barriers do you face—if any—in getting the time you need to be alone? How do you overcome or deal with those barriers?*
- 21) What reaction or feelings do you have to the word “solitude”?
- 22) How do you think your society or community feels and thinks about “solitude”?*
- 23) Do you have any advice for someone who wants to start being in solitude?
- 24) Do you have any other thoughts you want to share about solitude with me?

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