

# Turning Loneliness into Solitude



## FIGHT THE STIGMA SURROUNDING DOING THINGS ALONE AND LEARN TO LOVE YOUR OWN COMPANY BY SCHYLER MARTIN

Paul Tillich, a 20th-century existentialist philosopher and theologian, wrote, "Our language has wisely sensed the two sides of being alone. It has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."

Spending time in solitude can be relaxing and enlightening. It can remind us of our individuality, and it can give us time to think. But in a world where it's easy to feel constantly connected via social media or text messages on our cellphones, the idea of doing things alone can be incredibly intimidating.

In an online poll, 65 percent of participating Spark readers said they would be less likely to go out to eat, go see a movie or attend a social function if they had to go by themselves. Just 35 percent of responders said they would feel comfortable on their own. Through comments, readers elaborated on why doing things alone can be a scary notion. Many feared the way others might perceive them. Others thought that they would be bored or lonely by themselves.

Jamie Linker, a sophomore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, admits that she hardly ever goes in public by herself and that she wouldn't dream of eating in a restaurant alone.

"There's something sad about it to

me," Linker says. "I feel like everyone would judge me."

Linker is bubbly, typically confident and "pretty much everything but shy." Still, she says that she doesn't even feel comfortable eating alone in the dining halls at her college, despite the fact that many other students dine alone.

"I just feel like I don't have any friends if I eat by myself," Linker says. "It's so lonely!"

Amanda Ross, a professional hairdresser, shares Linker's sentiment. When asked if she feels comfortable doing things alone, she says that she almost always feels more comfortable with at least one other person.

"It's not that I'm that uncomfortable with what I'm doing," Ross says. "It's more that I feel like people are looking at me like I'm weird for not being with someone."

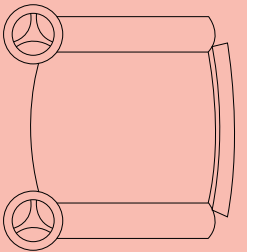
The idea of feeling judged for being alone is not a new one. But is it valid? Do people really judge those who dine alone more harshly than those who dine with others? Harvard professor Bella DePaulo, an expert on single life and the author of several books about living life on one's own, explored judgment regarding dining alone in an unpublished study. She revealed the results of the study in an online article in 2011.

In DePaulo's research, she took photographs of different groups of four

## THE BIG PROS TO SEEING A MOVIE ALONE:

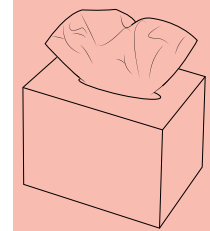
### YOU GET BOTH ARMRESTS!

No longer are you forced to share or feel uncomfortable. You can stretch out, sit wherever you like and feel completely at ease with your view of the screen.



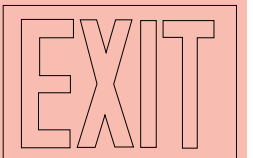
### YOU CAN CRY IF YOU WANT TO.

Or dance. Or laugh. Or react just about any way you want to, without risking any judgment from whomever you're with.



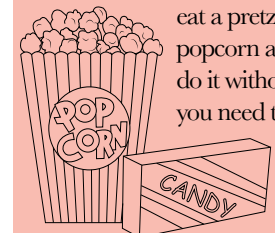
### YOU CAN LEAVE.

If the acting in the film leaves something to be desired, you're unhappy with the way the plot's going, or you simply feel like getting ice cream, you don't have to stick it out because of someone else. You can simply get up and go.



### YOU CAN GET POPCORN AND CANDY.

Speaking of leaving for ice cream, if you see a film alone, you don't have to feel excessive about what you bring into the theater. If you want to eat a pretzel, a chocolate bar, popcorn and an apple, you can do it without feeling as though you need to explain yourself, which, for the record, you really don't have to do anyway.



people – two men and two women each time – as they had dinner together in a restaurant. Some of the sets of people were young adults. Some were middle aged. DePaulo used Photoshop to airbrush out one or more of the people seated at the dinner. After the airbrushing, some photographs included the original four people, some included two people, others included three people, and the key photographs for the study included just one person dining alone.

“What was important about the technique of Photoshopping is that each diner had the

exact same facial expression and posture in each version of the photo,” DePaulo said in her 2011 article. “That way, if other people judged the solo diners more harshly (which is what we expected), it wouldn’t be because the solo diners actually appeared more despondent than the coupled diners did.”

After showing the airbrushed photographs to hundreds of people and asking them to share their judgments about the solo diners, DePaulo’s research showed surprising results.

While some people did offer harsher


judgments, such as assuming that the lone diner was lonely or had no friends, DePaulo concluded that the way the solo diners were judged hardly differed from the way the couples or groups of diners were perceived.

According to DePaulo, many perceptions of the solo diners were actually quite positive. For example, some said the person eating by himself or herself looked as if he or she wanted to relax, was enjoying dinner, just wanted to eat alone, wanted time to ponder or was secure.

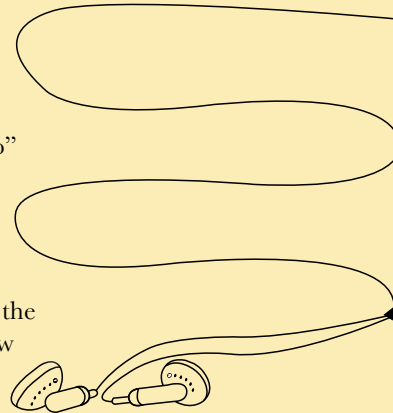
“The research was very careful and

## TIPS FOR DINING ALONE:

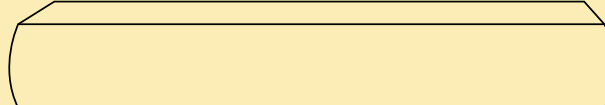
While the stigma surrounding dining alone may not truly be as extreme as many think, that doesn’t mean that everyone will suddenly be comfortable alone in public. However, there are some simple ways to feel more comfortable while on your own.



**BRING A PEN AND NOTEPAD**—Even if you don’t have work to do, bringing a notepad to scribble thoughts in can help you look and feel busy. Who knows? Maybe inspiration will strike while you’re out, and the paper and pen can come in handy? After all, the idea for Harry Potter simply “fell into” J.K. Rowling’s head while she was traveling on a train.



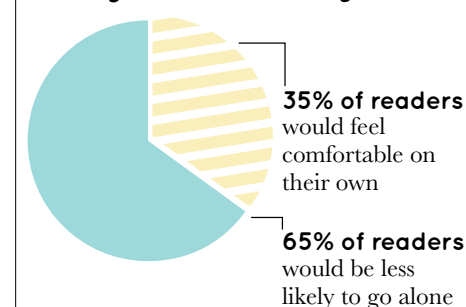
**POP IN SOME HEADPHONES**—If the silence is too much for you and you find yourself bored while alone, use music or podcasts as a way to pass the time and make yourself feel more comfortable. To help, we’ve included a few good suggestions for what to listen to on the side!



**BRING A BOOK**—Eating alone can be a great time to get some reading in, and the book can help you forget about whatever’s making you uncomfortable.



### Feeling comfortable on your own



In an online poll, participating Spark readers were asked if they would be less likely to go out to eat, go see a movie or attend a social function if they had to go by themselves, or if they would feel comfortable on their own.

systematic,” DePaulo said. “It was never published, though, because all of my predictions turned out to be wrong. The ways that solo diners are judged turned out to differ hardly at all from how couples or pairs of friends or groups of three people are viewed.”

Basically, DePaulo found that the stigma surrounding dining alone isn’t as strong as many seem to think it is. In fact, most people don’t seem to think any less of solo diners at all, and statistically, that makes sense.

In a 2012 essay, Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist and author, reported that 5 million people in the United States between ages 18 and 34 lived alone. That’s 10 times more than the number that lived alone in

1950. According to Klinenberg, the largest numbers of people living alone are between the ages of 35 and 64, and they live alone by choice.

Though we live in a connected world, we also live in a highly individualistic one. More and more people are living alone. While living alone might be more drastic than what many people are looking for, that knowledge does offer a bit more comfort to those who don’t feel at ease going to a restaurant, going to a movie theater or going to a social event alone.

With so many people living alone, the stigma surrounding loneliness seems to be changing. So, take a chance. Head out to a restaurant and ask for a table for one.

“Having a solitary meal in a restaurant is a basic spiritual practice,” Sherry Turkle, an author who studies the relationships between technology and people, says in one of her books. “It’s a classic way to experience moments of solitude and to refresh and restore and gather yourself.”

Indeed, modern society seems to be embracing the idea of enjoyable solitude, rather than sad, unfulfilled loneliness. Jo Pearse, a teacher for a telecommunications company in Alberta, Canada, says that after getting past the fear of social stigmas, she has found her happiness in going to see movies alone.

“I remember the first time I went to the movies by myself,” Pearse recalled in a recent interview. “I felt so sad, so obviously alone. I bought two drinks to go with my popcorn, as though I was waiting for a friend.”

After the movie ended, Pearse wound up going to see three more movies in the same afternoon. She says that, surprisingly, she found the action brought her relief and exhilaration rather than anxiety. These days, Pearse regularly goes to the theater by herself.

“Going to the movies alone is something that I’ve realized surprises people, and it makes me feel proud of my aloneness, instead of being ashamed that I’m not with someone else,” Pearse says. “I am doing my life the way I want to, instead of waiting for somebody else to join me.”

Pearse might be on to something with her solitary trips to the movies. Because of the dark, cozy setting and the lack of potential conversation during films, theaters might

Be able to be alone.  
Lose not the advantage  
of solitude, and the  
society of thyself.

—Thomas Browne

just be the perfect place for some alone time.

Though Pearse admits that she was nervous about how others would view her, she says that she quickly realized that no one even noticed that she was by herself, and she soon forgot about any of her issues. Though she knows everyone won’t take her advice, Pearse urges people to try going to the movies alone at least once. She says that one of her favorite things about spending time alone is that she can do whatever she likes, without having to ask permission from another person.

The great Justin Timberlake said it well: “The best part about being alone is that you really don’t have to answer to anybody. You do what you want.”

Venturing out on your own doesn’t have to mean that you’re sad and lonely and have no friends. It doesn’t have to mean that you spend your days being bored. Instead, let alone time be something special. Learn to enjoy your own company, and allow yourself to enjoy the time you have to let loose and relax. A bit of solitude might be exactly what you need.

## A PLAYLIST FOR SOLITUDE

### “THIEVES BY SHE & HIM”

In this breezy, upbeat tune, Zooey Deschanel sings, “Sometimes lonely isn’t sad,” and she’s exactly right.

### “THE MAN” BY ALOE BLACC

This song is an instant confidence boost.

### “RIVER FLOWS IN YOU” BY YIRUMA

This beautiful piano tune can help you relax and open your mind.

### “JOY TO YOU BABY” BY JOSH RITTER

This song about finding joy no matter what the circumstance is perfect for any situation.

### “LET IT GO” BY IDINA MENZEL

Sure, it’s from the children’s movie “Frozen,” but this song will pump you up and inspire you to let go of your inhibitions about being alone.

