



Me, Myself, and I Enjoying Being Alone

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When asked what is the biggest health crisis facing America today, Dr. Mehmet Oz answered in a surprising way. He didn't say obesity (a big one), heart disease (a deadly one), or addiction (a crucial one) he replied, "Loneliness." It's something that we don't often think about as a problem per se, although most of us experience it either directly or more indirectly as a symptom. Since we are social creatures meant to be together in close relationships, when those fall apart and we're left alone, we find ourselves in a very uncomfortable and unnatural state. In trying to deal with these feelings, the familiar addictive strategies of trying to fill or anesthetize ourselves kick in and we risk ending up with some of the above related health conditions/diseases.

Loneliness is multi-faceted and is more prevalent than ever before in our modern era.

The strong sense of local community that helped to build this nation no longer exists in the same way, so the place that we could count on for most of our relationship needs is less present, solid, and available. In its place are vast arrays of pseudo connective mechanisms that make it seem like we're connecting, such as Facebook, internet chatting, texting/sexting, and online dating. All of these attempts to connect give us momentary feelings of gratification but eventually leave us feeling even more alone, isolated, and unfulfilled. It's then that we're prone to reach out for ways to fill this real emptiness inside, through food, shopping, sex, drugs, and other stimulants meant to distract us from our deeper emotions of anxiety, depression, sadness, or even existential disillusionment.

The solution however doesn't come from outside us, although a movement toward creating greater community would certainly be healthy and welcome. It must come from within us. And it comes from learning to be alone with ourselves...with our three best friends: me, myself and I. I remember hearing that growing up and chuckling when my mother said it after her divorce. But when I saw her put it into practice I really got to see the measure of its impact. She learned to go out on her own (this was before women's lib), something many people even today find hard to do, and create a much more fulfilling life for herself, by herself. That stayed with me over the years. I too have learned to enjoy the pleasure of my own company, to be with myself and to savor moments of being alone.

It's in being able to be with our aloneness that we can then learn to stave off loneliness, as the two are very different. When we're able to step back from all the activity and settle down for a little while, we're then able to more truly get to know who we really are (not who we may have been told we are or should be), what we need, and what brings us pleasure. From here we can mobilize our energies which makes it easier to reach out into our environment to get our needs met. So often in our chaotic lives our impatience has us just settling for people who are not in our best interest, or who don't serve our higher good and our authentic selves. We end up taking the easy way out, giving in to our anxieties and fears of being alone, and going into unproductive or detrimental relationships that offer little except for some immediate gratification or the illusion of connection. And too often many end up staying for far too long, so as not to have to face being alone, again.

What if being alone, with oneself, wasn't such a terrifying prospect? What if we could actually enjoy "being" with ourselves, with our own thoughts, interests and pursuing our own unique desires so that we wouldn't need to be with someone and so enjoyed our own company that we could instead choose to be with someone?

I can still recall one instance of this that totally changed my life and had me know that I could be alone and the world wouldn't end. It was a New Year's Eve in my mid twenties shortly after I moved to New York City. I was happy to have a date for the all-important evening when she called that afternoon to cancel. I was crushed and wasn't sure just what to do, whether I should desperately try to find another date somehow (this was way before Craigslist and Match.com) or to go out to some random bar and try to feel festive.

Not liking either option, I came up with another, which was to celebrate the New Year by myself with myself. So I went out and bought some of my favorite food and drink and as the evening unfolded began to have my own little party, dancing and singing along with the Beatles' first album and ringing in the New Year happily just with me. I've had many New Years since, but this is the one that stands out the most after all these years.

Being able to be with one's Self is a must for real happi-

ness and a major prerequisite for an intimate relationship. Intimacy is about being self-revealing so it's necessary to have developed a true sense of self in order to achieve it. We need a solid sense of who we are to come back to after we experience the ecstasy of coming in and out of merging with our partners in the wonderful dance of intimacy.

In my work with single clients who come in to work on finding a relationship or with my couples doing the work of self-differentiation to create a healthier one, I often quote an author who I used in writing my dissertation (C. Moustakas, *Loneliness and Love*). He says that if an individual simply embraces his loneliness and doesn't defend against it, it creates a bond and a sense of fundamental relatedness to others. "It's not the loneliness that separates the person from others but the terror of loneliness and the constant efforts to escape it."

So much of our suffering today comes from this need to escape, thus creating larger, more serious problems. Perhaps we can instead learn to care for our loneliness and suffering so that we can find within the pain and isolation the courage and hope for what is brave and lovely and true in life. By learning to relax into our being alone with ourselves and serve our loneliness as a way to self-identity, we can start to love from a more solid place and begin to have faith in the wonder of living and the courage to fully live all that life has to offer.



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