

A woman wearing a colorful helmet, a yellow shirt, a patterned scarf, and pink pants is riding a bicycle on a brick path. She is smiling and has her arms outstretched. The path is surrounded by dense, green foliage and trees, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall scene is vibrant and joyful.

ME, MYSELF AND I

The art of enjoying one's own company

We are so careful to nurture the relationships with our family and friends that sometimes it is at the expense of the one with ourselves. Victoria Wells explores why we need time on our own and finds that one doesn't need to be the loneliest number

Imagine that you have a day to yourself. No plans. No children. No pressing domestic chores or other commitments. Just an empty day, stretching ahead of you. Now, is that increased heart rate due to excitement – or panic?

For some, the prospect of being alone without anything to do is blissful. For Nicky, a mum-of-two, it was appalling. When her husband Sam announced he and some other dads were taking their children camping for a weekend to give the mums a break, Nicky wasted no time in making plans. “I thought ‘Right, I have friends in Wellington and haven’t seen them for ages’ so straight away I had my laptop out and was looking at flights. Sam was like, ‘What are you doing? Why do you have to go somewhere?’”

A self-described extrovert, Nicky says her reaction to hearing she would be alone for a weekend was an immediate desire to fill that time. “The thought of that space was not appealing,” she confesses. “It was, ‘Gasp! If they’re going to be off doing something then I must do something too!’”

When Sam pointed out she could just have some time to herself, Nicky was at first indignant that he was interfering in her plans, but then realised he might have a point. “I’m so busy all the time and there’s always a thousand things happening, so you’re always running with that momentum. [But] I don’t like the idea of just spending time by myself.”

ALL BY MYSELF

Although nearly everyone complains of struggling to find enough hours in the day, taking time for yourself to pause, recharge and reflect is more important than ever.

We have become so accustomed to living life constantly in top gear that it seems we are now wary of any hint of space. You might be home by yourself but feel compelled to catch up on housework; or waiting for a friend at a café, but scrolling news headlines on your phone. We instinctively fill any spare moment – and that’s where we can run into trouble. “People can often struggle with being alone with their thoughts,” explains Auckland-based clinical psychologist Dr Chantal Hofstee, author of *Mindfulness on the Run*. “A lot of people find it hard to

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just ‘be’ and not ‘do.’”

But just ‘being’ is more difficult than ever, due to the inexorable seeping of social media into our daily lives. As long as we have battery power, we need never be alone. In fact, the ready availability and expectation of constant connectedness has virtually removed the ability to do so.

“We’re in a society where it’s quite normal to be watching a movie on TV while scrolling Pinterest on your iPad and getting messages through WhatsApp on your phone,” says Hofstee. “We’ve become used to this constant stream of information. When it’s just us with our thoughts it can actually be quite scary, because we’re not used to it any more.”

So the question is: If you could find some time to switch off from daily distractions and be alone with your thoughts, would you really want to?

TAKING TIME OUT

Taking time out to think or let your mind wander has proven benefits in recharging your brain, creative thinking, working through problems, concentration and simply getting to know yourself, which

helps you feel more connected to how you are feeling and in turn helps your relationships with others. But too often, time with ourselves is pushed to the backburner.

“What I hear a lot,” says Hofstee, “is that we almost feel cheated out of the luxury of having time for ourselves – but at the same time we never take it. We never make time for it.”

For Nicky, the weekend by herself went from being something to be endured to something she really enjoyed, even declining a drinks invitation in favour of hanging

out by herself. She says it was a revelation. “It made me realise how quickly I will try to organise something! If you do just have a quiet day, then instinctively I think of that as wasted time, and it was a reminder that actually there might be some value in a day where not much happens.”

Chantel Hofstee agrees that it’s important to take time out of our daily lives to reflect. “When you’re always busy, it’s really easy to live your life and be going through the motions without ever stopping and thinking, ‘Am I really doing what I want to be doing? What is working for me and what are the things that are not sitting well with me?’ You run the risk of creating a backlog of stuff that you haven’t given your attention to. Sometimes things happen in life that are not fun and are not easy and it’s not necessarily a problem if you process it. If you suppress it, those can be the things that make it really hard for you to be alone because then you start to think about all those things.”

This was the case for Jo, who had a moment of revelation while driving to Whangamata for a family holiday. “The kids were with their ▶

father in one car and I was driving our station wagon, which was so crammed with stuff there was only room for me. I'd been feeling unsettled at work for a few months, but hadn't had the head space to really think about it. Suddenly, on that drive it was just me and my thoughts. By the time I got to the bach I knew what the issue was and realised it wasn't going to change. It was like a weight lifting and gave me the clarity I needed to start looking for another role."

Taking this time to sort out and work through a problem internally is part of helping your brain to process all your emotions and experiences.

"Processing is paying attention to something with kindness," explains Hofstee. "Then your brain naturally goes through processing information, experiences, emotions that were tied to that experience. We all have the ability to do this, but it does take paying attention to something for it to do that." This processing continues at night, as the brain decides what information can be forgotten and what needs to be stored in long-term memory. This explains why it is sometimes useful to 'sleep' on a problem.

But if this time with yourself is so beneficial, why do so many of us still struggle with the idea?

THE ART OF BEING ALONE

For some, being alone with their thoughts is to let their negative or self-critical side surface. "One way to not hear that self-critical voice is to distract yourself," explains Hofstee. "But if you could work on thinking more positive thoughts and being more self-forgiving and being nicer to yourself then being by yourself doesn't become so uncomfortable any more."

Part of learning to enjoy your own company is about liking yourself and feeling comfortable in your own skin. "People who are perfectionistic might seem very confident but there is usually a strong element of self-critique in there. Self-esteem is being comfortable with who you are and confident in what you can do. That doesn't mean you



think you're perfect but it does mean you're self-aware; you know what you're good and not good at and you can see things realistically instead of always seeing the negative."

Chantal Hofstee says mindfulness is an excellent tool when it comes to re-training any negative thinking and changing your 'self-talk' - your inner voice - by being kinder to yourself and adopting a non-judgemental attitude.

"A lot of us talk to ourselves in ways that we would never talk to anybody else. Changing that opens up a lot of things: it will be easier to be on your own because you're nicer to be with, but I think it also helps you to tap into an inner wisdom and intuition, trusting your gut instinct, which is hard when you are constantly beating yourself up.

"[It's] Being able to look yourself in the eye, so to speak, and be okay with who you are. To know yourself and be connected to who you are, what you want, how you're feeling and why you're feeling that way."

Since her Solo Weekend, Nicky is now more aware of making space for herself without distraction. "I have tried to make time, even if it's in the morning amid the chaos, to take a cup of tea and just go and sit outside and feel the weather and look around and listen to the traffic starting. I am aware of not starting the day already feeling frazzled - carving out that time to just be a bit peaceful before everything gets frantic."

And while some alone time is good, it can be easy to cross the line from 'alone' to 'lonely'. As humans, we have an in-built need for social contact, so it's important to balance socialising with friends and family with getting some time out for reflection.

"We need a conversation with a friend over a cup of coffee," says Hofstee. "We need to have time with our partners, where we're not just sorting out the kids but we're actually sitting down and talking without being distracted, and we need that time ourselves as well, because the relationship that you have with yourself is just as important." ✨