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## **Solitude Without Loneliness: Understanding Loneliness in Terms of Psychological Separation**

Abstract: I suggest that the reason why fear of loneliness is not ubiquitous is because loneliness is essentially an experience of “ego-separation.” Ego-separation exists on a continuum. While it may be extreme in some people, others may experience little or no ego-separation, and so be less prone to loneliness. On the contrary, such people embrace and relish solitude and inactivity, with no distressing effects. I refer to Maslow’s concept of self-actualization and my own research on the state of “wakefulness.” I conclude that positive psychological development should involve a healthy relationship to solitude and inactivity.

### **Keywords**

Loneliness, solitude, ego-separation, disconnection, connection

In my response, I would like to suggest an answer to what Fromm-Reichmann describes as the “unanswered question” of why fear of loneliness is “not ubiquitous.”

Fromm-Reichmann comments that many people are “made anxious even by temporary aloneness—or even by silence, which may or may not connote potential aloneness” (1990, p.314). 65 years after her paper, this is truer than ever. One of the strongest human compulsions is to seek entertainments and activity in order to keep our attention focused outside our own mental space. It is interesting how this compulsion remains constant over generations, while distractions vary. Fromm-Reichmann describes the typical distractions of late 1950s America, noting how people try to avoid loneliness “by playing bridge, by looking for hours at television, by listening to the radio, by going compulsively to dances, parties, the movies” (1990, p.314). This reminds me of the famous passage from Pascal’s *Pensées*: “The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room... The only good thing for men is to be diverted from thinking what they are...that is why gaming and feminine society, war and high office are so popular” (1966, p. 68). Of course, in 2024, our distractions are mostly electronic: social media, email, podcasts, and so on.

In my view, the essence of loneliness is a sense of psychological separation, or “ego-separation” (Taylor, 2023a). Loneliness fundamentally means to experience ourselves as individuated entities who live inside our own personal mental space, in separation from other human beings, and from a world that appears to be “out there.” No doubt, as Fromm-Reichmann suggests, there is a threat to “self-orientation” too, since we derive our sense of self from “overt relationships with others” (1990, p.314). We need contact with others to maintain our sense of identity. In loneliness, our sense of identity weakens.

At the same time, loneliness involves experiencing what Csikszentmihalyi (1992) calls “psychic entropy” – the habitual restlessness of our minds, leaping from one association to the next, and often gravitating to negative thoughts. For people who suffer from more intense psychological discord, perhaps due to depressive tendencies or past trauma, then loneliness is an even more negative experience.

### **Embracing Solitude**

However, ego-separation is not a constant, or even a given. It exists on a continuum. The type of personality that I have referred to as “hyper-disconnected” (Taylor, 2023a, 2023) experiences extreme separation, and therefore has an intense fear of solitude and inactivity. Hyper-disconnected people are unable to form any emotional connection to others, or to feel empathy. Their intense separation typically generates an intense desire to accumulate success,

power and wealth, together with a deep unconscious frustration, which may express itself in violent and destructive behavior (Taylor, 2023a, 2023b).

Hyper-disconnected typically feel a compulsive need for activity and company to avoid experiencing the discomfort of their extreme separation. One example is the British business tycoon Robert Maxwell – father of Ghislaine Maxwell – whose hyper-disconnection was probably linked to early life experiences of trauma and emotional and material deprivation. In the words of one of Maxwell’s confidantes, “What drove him more than anything [was] ...the desire to generate activity, no matter how pointless it was. Above all, he dreaded being on his own with nothing to do” (in Preston, 2021, p.132).

However, some people experience less ego-separation than others. A small proportion of people may experience very little separation at all, and are therefore less prone to loneliness. Rather than seeking to avoid solitude, they may embrace and savor it. Maslow (1954) identified a greater than normal need for peace and solitude as one of the characteristics of self-actualized individuals. Maslow also made it clear that self-actualization involved a sense of empathic connection with others. As he put it, in the self-actualized state, there is, “a deep feeling of identification, sympathy and affection... Because of this [self-actualizers] have a genuine desire to help the human race. It is as if they were all members of a single family” (Maslow, 1954, p. 217).

In my own research, I have found that a positive attitude to solitude is one of characteristics of “wakefulness,” a state of expansive awareness with a strong sense of connection to other human and living beings, to nature and the world in general. Wakefulness can be cultivated gradually or arise suddenly and dramatically in the aftermath of intense psychological turmoil (Taylor, 2017, 2021). In this state, people relish quietness and inactivity. Many people reported that they never felt lonely, even if they were alone for long periods. One participant reported, “I really love my quietude. It gives me the chance to read and delight and meditate in a different way that allows for reflection and for an ever-deepening.” (Taylor, 2017, p.205). Another person reported, “I can be on my own for long periods of time and doing nothing and that is okay with me” (Taylor, 2017, p.206).

In other words, our attitude to solitude, and our vulnerability to loneliness, depends on our degree of separation or connection, together with our degree of psychological discord. The more ego-separation and psychological discord we experience, the more vulnerable we are to loneliness. But when we experience little or no ego-separation, we relish solitude - and also inactivity. The compulsion to keep our minds occupied fades away.

Healthy psychological development therefore involves developing a positive relationship to solitude and inactivity. Or more strictly speaking, it means developing a stronger sense of connection and kinship to other human and living beings, to nature, and the world in general. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we should isolate or death ourselves from others – we should aim for a healthy balance of society and solitude. At the very least, we should learn not to fear the inevitable moments when we are obliged to be alone. On the contrary, we should view these periods as an opportunity to enter and explore our own inner being, and to reattune to our essential selves.

One aspect of Fromm-Reichmann’s paper that I love is that she incorporates many literary quotes. So let me conclude my response paper in the same spirit, with a quote from D.H. Lawrence’s poem, *The Uprooted*. In this poem, Lawrence vividly portrays the connection between ego-isolation and loneliness. As he writes, ‘People who complain of loneliness must have lost something,/Lost some living connection with the cosmos, out of themselves... like a plant whose roots are cut.’ For Lawrence himself, who lived in an intense state of connection, ‘To be alone is one of life’s greatest delights... feeling oneself uninterrupted in the rooted connection with the centre of all things’ (1994, p.610).

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