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Mindfulness 101: The Paradox and Promise of Solitude at a Time of Social Distancing

By Scott L. Rogers

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In today's column we explore the subject of solitude and its importance to the quality of our well-being and life's work. The form of solitude that I will share departs from conventional thinking for there is little trace of it when curled up on a couch reading a good book or taking a walk outdoors listening to a podcast. It's the kind of solitude you can experience in a house full of people, the kind that patiently follows you wherever you go. After providing some background and resources, clarifying the term, and explaining why it matters, I'll share with you what I refer to as "mindful solitude," which offers a broader perspective on ways to understand and practice mindfulness.

A promotional banner for Dell Small Business. On the left is the Dell logo and the text "SMALL BUSINESS". In the center, it says "MONUMENTAL BUSINESS SAVINGS" with a "PRESIDENTS DAY UP TO 60% OFF" tag. To the right, it lists "PLUS, MEMBERS SAVE AN EXTRA 8% HIGH-PERFORMANCE COMPUTERS, TOP-BRAND ELECTRONICS & MORE" next to an image of a laptop. Further right, it shows "\$759 Latitude 5490" and a "Shop Now" button. On the far right is the Intel Core i5 8th Gen logo and the text "Intel Core i5".

The Freedom of Solitude

Various contemporary thinkers have addressed the importance of solitude to domains including creativity, decision making, emotional balance, and mental health. These include Cal Newport, author of *Digital Minimalism* (Portfolio, 2019); Judge Raymond M. Kethledge and Michael S. Erwin, authors of *Lead Yourself First* (Bloomsbury, 2017); and William Deresiewicz, whose speech at West Point in 2009 may have set the current dialogue in motion. In *Lead Yourself*, Kethledge and Erwin succinctly define solitude as a state of mind "isolated from input from other minds." Let's explore what this means and why it matters.

Today's 24/7 digitally infused world leaves us with precious little time to be alone with our thoughts—not because we are never alone, but because we are so dependent on the stimulation of social

media, the Internet, texting, apps, e-mail, and countless information and entertainment channels, all of which communicate the thoughts, ideas, and creative *output of other minds*. There is nothing inherently wrong with this content, as the value of books, podcasts, videos, art, music, and conversation goes without saying. The problem arises when deprived of the time needed to process this input and refresh and recharge the processor. Newport and others make the case that insufficient periods of solitude come at a steep price, not only compromising our ability to absorb and integrate the very information we gathered but contributing to anxiety, depression, addiction, and loneliness. You may find it instructive to reflect on the proportion of time you spend each day free from the input of other minds. Fortunately, an effective countermeasure is both free and readily accessible.

Social Distancing That Can Be Done Anywhere

The lesson and invitation of “solitude” is to periodically take a break from the output of other minds—a refreshing form of social distancing. There are many formulations for doing so, and people have long been talking about the need for a digital detox, a digital declutter, taking a mental health day. You may have already made the decision to reduce screen time, take a break from social media, or cut back on Netflix, YouTube, and the like. But an important question to consider is what are you replacing it with?

Amid the conditions associated with COVID-19, solitude may be more important than ever. And, fortunately, even if there are more people in your home than ever before, solitude beckons. And so, too, living alone is no guarantee of solitude, for the greatest impediment to solitude may be that we just don't know what to do with ourselves. Blaise Pascal's insight that many of our problems are caused by our “inability to sit quietly in a room by ourselves” points both to the importance of solitude and the implications of its elusiveness. And while the pull of social media may certainly exacerbate this problem, conditioning us to need more and more stimulation, Pascal's comment was directed to an enlightened 17th century.

Self-Directed Solitude

One takeaway from this column is the importance of deliberately integrating periods of solitude into your day, be they a walk in nature, a run through the neighborhood, day dreaming, sitting outdoors, lying in bed reflecting on your day, or eating a meal . . . without integrating your cell phone into the experience. To reinforce the ready availability of such moments, they also include washing dishes, folding laundry, and taking a bath or shower. At first, doing so may be challenging, as you feel drawn to greater stimulation and to the handy devices that are oh-so-effective at

delivering the soothing hit. But in time you experience a measure of relief, as your busy mind reorients from the input of other minds to the input of its own.

As important as doing something in solitude may be, it is also important to know where your mind is while doing it. If you are eating a meal by yourself while glued to your iPad (the view of solitude with which you may have begun reading this article), you have little to say about where your mind is, for it, too, is glued to your iPad. When you eat in solitude, however, you are left with your own thoughts, which is probably what Pascal appreciated could be so daunting. You may have read that mind wandering takes place about 50 percent of the time, where we are often lost in thought about problems and self-critical judgments that depress our mood. To highlight this, recent research reported that some subjects left alone for about ten minutes in a room without their cell phones, but with a device that delivers a mildly unpleasant shock, would rather shock themselves than patiently await the return of the researcher. Truly shocking—or is it?

Mindfulness practices offer one path to being more at ease, focused, and emotionally steady throughout the day. That said, the practice itself can be challenging, and it can be difficult to sit for a period of time with “nothing to do.” One can become uneasy feeling the incessant tug of impulses, thinking about the past with misgivings and worrying about the future, and judging the present moment and oneself and others as not quite good enough. Though the tendency is to blame the discomfort on the mindfulness practice, or to one’s inability to “do it right”; what really may be going on is that the practice reveals a chronic condition that tends to be masked by always having something to do.

While this is a plug for mindfulness practice—the theme that runs through all these columns—it is not the primary message of this piece. After all, if you are sitting listening to a wonderful guided mindfulness practice, you are listening to the input of another’s mind. This points out that the richness of a period of solitude falls along a gradient. There are no pure moments of solitude, nor are there moments completely devoid of solitude. But we can appreciate how the input of other minds can move from passive, allowing for (perhaps even facilitating) a movement inward, to highly active and charged, leaving little room for meaningful or sustained introspection.

Mindful Solitude

One of the most common mindfulness practices involves placing attention on the breath with the intention to remain there and, when one realizes that attention has wandered, redirecting attention to the breath. If self-guided, this would be a period of solitude (by all accounts) and is of great utility. Notably, attention is somewhat constrained to one chosen object. Another popular

mindfulness practice involves establishing a more open and receptive quality of awareness, untethered to any particular object. While this form of practice does not constrain attention, neither does it embrace attending to anything at all. It, too, is an immensely worthwhile endeavor. A third form of mindfulness practice, arguably a little more challenging, is to find a sweet spot between the first two by steadying attention on the breath and then allowing attention to follow the activity of the mind—attending to the steady flow of thoughts, images, memories, feelings. We could refer to this as a state free from the input of other minds. More precisely, it's free from the *real-time* input of other minds, for we would be hard pressed to believe that many of the beliefs, thoughts, and judgments were not free from the input of others.

And here resides one of the benefits of such an inquiry—a freeing of the mind to process its own output. And while this “mindfulness of thoughts and feelings” practice can be challenging owing to the agitation that tends to accompany such mental activity, we can change our relationship to this input if we treat it more like the third-party digital content we have long digested for hours on end. It's a live streaming of our own mind. And of crucial importance, it's an opportunity to interact with that output—to recognize patterns, to reflect on fleeting ideas and insights, to settle down into moments of not knowing and not needing, and, increasingly, to experience a few precious moments of presence.

To recap, the first tip is to experience moments of self-directed solitude during the day, however you choose to construct it. The second tip is to integrate solitude into a mindfulness practice by attending to the output of your own mind. Rather than close with another 500 words, which would likely take you about five minutes to read, why not put this article down, lower or close your eyes, take a few slower, deeper breaths, and then review some me-mail.

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Scott L. Rogers

Scott L. Rogers is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness and law, as well as a teacher, researcher, and trainer. He is founder and director of the University of Miami School of Law's [Mindfulness in Law Program](#), and he co-founded and co-directs the University of Miami's [Mindfulness Research & Practice Initiative](#). Scott is the author of five books including the recently released *The Elements of Mindfulness*.

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