

The power of One

With a host of digital distractions, solitude has never been so elusive – or more essential. A beleaguered Kate Baily looks at the benefits of being all by yourself

The iconic words of Greta Garbo – “I want to be alone” – echo in my head as the children race around the house blazing a trail of destruction. The TV is blaring, the radio is on and I’m frantically checking my emails only to be interrupted by a text message. The five minutes’ peace and quiet I ordered are still in the luggage hold of Pork Airlines, as I wait for pigs to fly and lock myself in the loo for a bit of “mummy time”.

I know that no woman is an island but, even if I did manage to escape to a deserted paradise, I’m certain my kids would find a way to “poke” me for another biscuit.

Thanks to satellite technology, BlackBerrys and global roaming internet access, from the tops of mountains to the darkest forest, there is officially no place on Earth where you can find peace these days. So what are we missing out on?

Since time immemorial, solitude has been prized for promoting spiritual enhancement and creative leaps. As Socrates said, “The unexamined life is one not worth living.” This may be a dash drastic but even if you’re not a genius or a complete oddball – in fact if you’re a perfectly normal, socially functioning modern human – a bit of me-time is brilliant for your mental and spiritual wellbeing.

I’m fairly sure that the Dalai Lama doesn’t Facebook while he’s eating a sandwich, and how many of humanity’s defining achievements would have got off the ground in the age of Twitter? Would Leonardo da Vinci have completed the *Mona Lisa* if he’d started the day by tweeting, “Just realised robe stuck in pants again LOL.”

As well as finding peace of mind, recent research has also proved that solitude is vital for healthy social relationships. It’s that old thing of needing to be able to have a relationship with yourself before you can truly connect with anyone else.

“We spend a daily average of 90 minutes stuck in traffic, 30 waiting for public transport and an hour dealing with bureaucracy”

It’s a bit like battery power: we have to be able to switch off if we want to be switched on. The benefits of sufficient rest, relaxation and de-stressing practises like meditation are also well known but, let’s face it, unless you are Gwyneth Paltrow, regular trips to a Buddhist retreat are probably unlikely. According to psychologist Avy Joseph, co-founder of CityMinds (www.cityminds.com), R and R has become a luxury.

“We spend a daily average of 90 minutes stuck in traffic, 30 minutes waiting for public transport, an hour dealing with bureaucracy and even longer finding things we have misplaced at home,” says Joseph, author of *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: Your Route Out of Perfectionism* (Capstone, £9.99). “On top of this, working days are longer so, for many of us, the reality is that taking time out is now a luxury.”

Spiritual psychologist Nicola Phoenix agrees: “Mobile phones constantly bleep and ring, providing endless distractions. We are becoming addicted to the constant stimulation – and the expectation of being contacted.”

Guilty as charged. I have a love-hate relationship with my iPhone because it allows me to juggle my professional and personal life. I like to think I get more done but I’m not convinced it’s very effective. I was on a farm the other day with the kids, stroking goats with one hand and fielding work calls with the other. The little ones were fed up and my boss was deafened by threats of relegation to the farmer’s naughty step. Checking the answer machine when you get home feels an almost

ancient art form but having some barrier to my illusion of productive multitasking would have made for a much better day.

No wonder we find solitude so difficult – it’s a skill we’ve forgotten how to use. I love the idea of sitting in my garden with a glass of wine once

the kids have gone to bed. But in reality, after the mayhem of the day, I find the sudden switch to downtime hard to manage and a little unnerving. So instead of using this precious opportunity to let my adrenal system calm down and my levels of cortisol to settle, I distract myself further by sending texts while watching repeats of *America’s Next Top Model* and wondering why I find it hard to get off to sleep.

It’s a vicious circle. So how can we begin to break out of it?

“Learn to give yourself permission, not only to be alone but to stop,” says Phoenix. “Keeping busy can be a way of distracting ourselves from addressing important issues that really need attention such as, ‘How is my relationship? Do I actually like my job? Should I finally face that health issue that has been bothering me?’”

“Guilt also plays a big part,” she continues. “People feel they have to give all the time and that resting would be wrong or bad. Scheduling in one night a week just for a bath and some general pampering is a good way of learning to be alone without distraction.”

Stealing the occasional lunch hour alone can also help you practise the art of being by yourself. And recognising when we are overstimulating ourselves is especially important.

“Notice those times you are walking along holding your mobile phone, or even having it on you when you don’t really need it,” says Phoenix. “We need to learn when to switch off.”

It may not be the desert-island fix many of us desire, but these simple practices really can help us “dial it down”.

The irony is, solitude is something we crave when we are busy but, like my nan who always used to keep the TV on for company, if you’re isolated for too long it can send you loopy.

There’s a reason why solitary confinement is a form of torture. It’s all about choice. Sometimes it can be good to force yourself to meet up with friends, even when you feel like crawling into a hole and eating pineapple chunks from a tin in your pyjamas. But I, for one, am totally shattered – so I reckon it’s time to unplug the phone, switch off the television, put the laptop away, bury the iPhone at the bottom of the garden and give peace a chance. ☺



ILLUSTRATION BY ROD CLARK © THE ART MARKET

Going solo: S Magazine's guide to everyday solitude

- “Set your alarm a little earlier to have a few minutes at home before anyone else wakes. Try getting to work before your colleagues or have a stroll through the park to make your morning journey a time for reflection and calm. Let your mornings be less rushed and more about setting yourself up for the day with some time alone. It does not need to be long to have a positive effect.”

- “Take a proper lunch break. This is your time to rest and refresh for the afternoon. Don’t sit at your desk, as that’s not a break – it’s just eating while you work. Every week, try to set aside at least one lunch break by yourself to just sit, eat and rest.”

- “Aim to designate one weekday evening for pampering and time alone, without any telephone calls, computer interaction or other interruptions. Have a hot relaxing bath, read a book, watch a movie and look after your needs.”

- “When you are on the bus, train or tube, put your mobile away and allow yourself a few moments without the constant stimulation of ‘being in touch’. Turn it off when you can, and know that you deserve to have mental time away from work. Take time to sit, close your eyes, focus on your breathing, listen to a relaxation CD, or simply just ‘be’.”

Nicola Phoenix’s book *Reclaiming Happiness: 8 Strategies for an Authentic Life and Greater Peace* (Findhorn Press, £8.99) is out now. To order this and other titles, see *Express Bookshop*, page 82