NEWS LESSON

We Have Been Told Being Alone Is Bad For Us. The Telling May Be the Problem



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Can a belief about an experience change the experience itself?
2. Who in your society has the least opportunity to choose solitude?
3. Should newspapers be careful about how they write about loneliness?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**commendably**	☐	A	the freedom to make your own choices
2	**corpus**	☐	B	the fact that one thing makes another happen
3	**causation**	☐	C	a sudden feeling of fear or worry
4	**autonomy**	☐	D	a large collection of texts used for study
5	**instructed**	☐	E	told what to do or believe
6	**randomised**	☐	F	arranged by chance, not by choice
7	**frustration**	☐	G	in a way that deserves praise
8	**alarm**	☐	H	the feeling of being blocked from getting what you need

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Two recent papers suggest that solitude is shaped less by how much time you spend by yourself than by whether you chose it and what you have been taught to expect from it.

1 There is a particular pleasure in a cancelled plan when you are tired. An evening promised to somebody else returns to you, and with it the rare luxury of not explaining yourself. There are also evenings when the phone stays quiet and you wish it would not. The sofa is identical. The experience is not.

2 We tend to treat being alone as one condition with one emotional value, and it is neither. The fact of being by yourself and the feeling of loneliness come apart constantly. You can be alone and perfectly content, or surrounded by people and unreachable. You can treasure a silent afternoon and miss somebody during it.

3 A 2025 paper in Nature Communications by Rodriguez, Schertz and Kross set out to examine where our assumptions about solitude originate, and found a culprit close to home. Analysing 144 American newspaper articles from 2020 to 2022, the researchers found coverage of being alone was overwhelmingly negative, around ten times more likely to frame it as harmful than as beneficial. We are, in other words, instructed repeatedly that solitude is a deficiency.

4 The instruction appears to take. In their daily-life data, people holding negative beliefs about being alone reported greater loneliness following time by themselves, while those with positive beliefs reported less. The cross-national comparison pointed the same way, with higher national loneliness accompanying more negative beliefs. A randomised experiment showed the beliefs themselves are movable: participants who read about the benefits of solitude reported more positive views afterwards.

5 The authors are commendably restrained about what this establishes. Their observational studies cannot demonstrate causation, and they accept the arrow may point both ways. Loneliness is an excellent reason to regard an empty evening with suspicion.

6 There is an awkwardness in reporting this in a news article, which is itself a small addition to the corpus the researchers measured. The honest account is that writing about loneliness has tended towards alarm, because alarm travels, while the quieter proposition, that a good deal of time alone is unremarkable and some of it is restorative, makes a weak headline. That asymmetry is more or less what the 144 articles recorded.

7 A conceptual paper published in 2026 in Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, by Heissler and colleagues, proposes a complementary distinction. Drawing on self-determination theory, they argue that what separates solitude from loneliness is not isolation but motivation. Solitude is self-determined and chosen, and can support autonomy, competence or relatedness. Loneliness is non-self-determined, arriving through imposition or the frustration of those same needs. The practical implication is that environments which support people's autonomy may produce better solitude.

8 Two cautions are worth holding onto. Choice is not distributed evenly: a parent of young children and someone living far from friends do not face the same menu. And enjoying your own company is not a substitute for friendship. A good book cannot ask how you are. The goal is not to need nobody. It is to notice what you need, and to have some real chance of getting it.

Sources: Nature Communications, How people think about being alone shapes their experience of loneliness; Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, Time Alone: Solitude and Loneliness from the Self-Determining Perspective. Picture: .

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer admits that their own article belongs to the kind of coverage the researchers studied. (T) (F) (NG)
2. The authors of the 2025 paper conclude that negative beliefs cause loneliness. (T) (F) (NG)
3. The article says which newspapers gave the most negative coverage. (T) (F) (NG)
4. Two people with the same amount of free time may not have the same chance of solitude. (T) (F) (NG)
5. The writer suggests that editors find the positive view of solitude attractive. (T) (F) (NG)

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

culprit	imposition	itinerary	movable	originate	restrained	surcharge	unremarkable

1. The editor was _____ about the findings, refusing to claim more than the data allowed.
2. A quiet, _____ finding, that most time alone is fine, rarely makes a headline.
3. Researchers wanted to discover where such assumptions _____ .
4. Loneliness can arrive through the _____ of isolation by circumstance rather than choice.
5. The experiment suggests that beliefs about solitude are not fixed but _____ .
6. In searching for the _____ behind gloomy attitudes, the authors pointed to newspapers.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Coverage of being alone was _____ negative. (OVERWHELM)
2. It is _____ to treat solitude as one condition with one emotional value. (MISLEAD)
3. The paper is _____ rather than experimental, since it offers a theory. (CONCEPT)
4. Loneliness may make people _____ of an empty evening. (SUSPECT)
5. Solitude can support autonomy, competence or _____ . (RELATE)

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Check the word before the gap. Fixed verb, noun and adjective phrases choose the preposition for you, so test the phrase as a whole.

as	beneath	for	from	to	upon	with

1. The researchers regarded the coverage _____ some suspicion.
2. What separates solitude _____ loneliness is motivation, not isolation.
3. Enjoying your own company is no substitute _____ friendship.
4. Coverage of loneliness has been prone _____ alarm.
5. Newspapers tend to frame solitude _____ a problem.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The researchers admit the effect may run in both directions. How much does that weaken their argument?
2. Is there a risk in telling people that solitude is good for them?
3. The article says the goal is not to need nobody. What should the goal be?

9 Role-play: a cancelled evening

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the flatmate who wants a quiet night

Your friend cancelled your plans for tonight. You're delighted and want to stay in alone. Your flatmate wants company. Explain why time alone matters to you and suggest a fair compromise.

Student B · the flatmate who wants company

Your plans for tonight have fallen through and you feel a little lonely. Ask your flatmate to do something together. Explain why, and listen to their reasons.

Useful phrases

- I was really looking forward to a quiet night.
- It's not that I don't like your company.
- Could we do something together tomorrow instead?
- I'd rather spend the evening on my own.
- I don't want you to feel lonely.
- How about a short walk and then I'm yours?

Afterwards, tell the class: did you agree on a plan, and who gave way more?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 G · 2 D · 3 B · 4 A · 5 E · 6 F · 7 H · 8 C

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 restrained · 2 unremarkable · 3 originate · 4 imposition · 5 movable · 6 culprit

6 Word forms

1 overwhelmingly · 2 misleading · 3 conceptual · 4 suspicious · 5 relatedness

7 Language focus

1 with · 2 from · 3 for · 4 to · 5 as

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