



I'm Mostly Fine Now, But What about 2 Weeks from Now?

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A few years ago, I went for weeks without any contact with other humans. It was a time when the people I see most often all just happened to be away or otherwise preoccupied for some reason. Instead of doing what might have come naturally, reaching out to the people I don't see that often, I decided to turn the experience into an experiment.

How long would it take until my characteristic love of solitude would turn into loneliness and misery? I wrote about the experience in the Washington Post in "I've been single all my life. I rarely get lonely." Here's the briefest summary:

“The first week was pure bliss. During the second, I started to miss meaningful interactions with other people, but I was still mostly fine. But then I was done.”

That was my answer. I could last about 14 days before I started to really miss other humans.

I'm thinking about that now for the obvious reason. It is coronavirus time. I'm in California, one of the states in which everyone has been ordered to stay home. Plus, my age (66) puts me in a special risk category of people who are urged to cut back on even those excursions that are allowed, such as grocery shopping.

It has been less than a week since I canceled the last of my social engagements. Unlike my experience during my experiment a few years ago, I cannot say that this first week has been pure bliss.

In some ways, it has been fine. I find cocooning comforting and familiar. My everyday routines are about what they have always been, except that they are no longer punctuated with the occasional lunches or dinners or other get-togethers.

I also have an advantage this time, compared to last. I have plenty of contact with other people by email, social media, and an occasional phone call.

But it is different this time. I have a low-level sense of anxiety that was barely discernible on day 1 but has gotten a tad more insistent every day since. I still wouldn't call myself anxious or fearful. Yet those daily reports of increasing numbers of COVID-19 diagnoses and deaths do grab my attention, as do the worrisome predictions and the reports of shocking shortfalls in hospital space and personnel and personal protective equipment.

Another big difference from last time is that this period of social distancing was imposed; it wasn't my choice. Humans want control over their lives. People who are single value their freedom even more than other people do.

This feels more like the aftermath of 9/11, in the sense that I just can't seem to look away from the news. I know it is a bad idea to get too preoccupied but I'm not just hearing the same reports over and over again. Instead, there is a sort of horror movie progression. The first coronavirus case in California was reported. Then the first case in southern California. Then the first case in the county adjacent to mine. Then a few more there. Then, finally, someone was diagnosed in my own county, and now there are more every day.

No one knows how long this will go on. That's different from my previous experience, too. A big, unnerving difference.

One last thing is entirely different, in a way I never would have predicted. I study psychology. I wonder if we humans are going to come out of this experience changed in some fundamental way.

I'm writing a book about people who are "single at heart." One of the chapters I have been most eager to write is the one about solitude, and how much we single-at-heart types cherish our time alone. Will we still feel that way if alone-time is imposed on us for months on end?

And what about the people who love living with other people? Who fret about the specter of loneliness when they even think about the possibility of having time to themselves? Will they feel differently, too, after being cooped up with other humans month after month?

I wonder who else is rethinking something they've never questioned before.



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