



The Handbook of
SOLITUDE

**Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation,
Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone**

**Edited by Robert J. Coplan
and Julie C. Bowker**

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For
Kenneth H. Rubin
scholar, mentor, and friend

and

For
Our Families
without whom we would always feel alone

The Handbook Of Solitude

*Psychological Perspectives on Social Isolation,
Social Withdrawal, and Being Alone*

Edited by
Robert J. Coplan and Julie C. Bowker

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Foreword

On Solitude, Withdrawal, and Social Isolation

Kenneth H. Rubin

As I sit in my office pondering what it is that I should be writing in the Foreword to this extraordinary compendium, I am *alone*. With the door closed, I am protected against possible interruptions and am reminded of the positive features of solitude – there is no one around, it is quiet, and I can concentrate on the duties at hand. Indeed, several contributors to this volume have written about the pleasantries associated with solitude; frankly, I must agree with this perspective, but do so with a number of significant provisos. I will offer a listing of these provisos in the following text. However, before so doing, I would like to suggest a thought experiment or two.

A Science Fiction Thought Experiment

Why must one understand the significance of solitude, withdrawal, and social isolation? Let's begin with a little thought experiment. Imagine, for at least one millisecond, that we have arrived on a planet populated by billions of *people*. Never mind how these people came into existence. Let's just assume that they happen to be on the planet and that we know not how they came to be. Imagine too that there is no interpersonal magnetism ... that these people

never come together ... there are no interactions ... there is no crashing together or colliding of these individuals. All we can see are solitary entities walking aimlessly, perhaps occasionally observing each other. In short, we are left with many individuals who produce, collectively, an enormous social void. From an Earthly perspective, we might find the entire enterprise to be rather intriguing or boring or frightening and would likely predict that prospects for the future of this planet are dim.

Given that this is a supposed “thought exercise,” please allow me to humor myself and replace the aforementioned noun “people” with “atoms” or their intrinsic properties of electrons, protons, and neutrons. By so doing, one might have to contemplate such topics as magnetism and collision and the products of these actions. This would immediately give rise to thoughts of mass, electricity, and excitement. Without magnetism (attraction), electricity, and excitement, whatever would we be left with? As I move more forcefully into this exercise, I find myself in increasingly unfamiliar territory – I may study pretense, but I am not a pretender ... at least insofar as suggesting to anyone willing to listen (or read) that I have “real” knowledge about anything pertaining to physics. In fact, I am ever so happy to leave the study of the Higgs boson to that group of scholars engaged in research at CERN’s Large Hadron Collider.

For the time being, I will escape from any contemplation of physics and swiftly return to thinking about a planet on which *people* appear to exist without laws of attraction. If the “people” who inhabit the planet do not collide, we are left with the inevitability of what solitude would eventually predict – a nothingness, an emptiness, a void. If “people” did not collide, did not interact, there would be no “us.” Relationships would not exist; there would be no human groups, no communities, no cultures. There would be no sense of values, norms, rules, laws. Social hierarchies would

not exist; there would be no need to think about mind-reading, perspective-taking, interpersonal problem-solving. Liking, loving, accepting, rejecting, excluding, victimizing ... none of these significant constructs would be relevant. Social comparison, self-appraisal, felt security, loneliness,-rejection sensitivity ... topics that tend to appear regularly in the Developmental, Social, Personality, Cognitive, and Clinical Psychology literatures would be irrelevant. From my admittedly limited perspective, as a Developmental Scientist (and thankfully not as a Physicist), there would be nothing to write, think, feel, or be about. Thank goodness for those nuclear researchers at CERN. They have taught us that magnetism matters, that interactions matter, that clusters matter (and may collide to produce new entities). These folks are not pondering what happens with people ... they are thinking at the subatomic level. I, on the other hand, have spent the past 40-some years thinking about people, their individual characteristics, their interactions and collisions with one another, the relationships that are formed on the basis of their interactions, and the groups, communities, and cultures within which these individuals and relationships can be found. Indeed, I have collected more than a fair share of data on these topics. In so doing, I am left with the conclusion that solitude, isolation, and social withdrawal can be ruinous. It ain't science fiction.

A Second Thought Experience

Let's move to a rather different thought experience. Imagine that the community within which we live teaches its inhabitants, from early childhood, that normative sociocultural expectations involve helping, sharing, and caring with and for each other; teaching each other about

that which defines the “good, bad, and ugly”; communicating with each other about norms and what may happen when one conforms to or violates them. Imagine too, that in such a community within which interaction, cooperation, and relationships matter, there are some individuals who, *for whatever reason*, do not interact with their confreres. One might suppose that the remaining members of the community could ponder why it is that these solitary individuals behave as they do. And several suggestions may be offered for their solitude.

For example, it may be suggested that some of these noninteracting individuals have some biological or perhaps some genetic orientation that leads them to feel uncomfortable in the presence of others. Perhaps members of the community may have read something about a gene that is associated with diminished 5-HTT transcription and reduced serotonin uptake. Some in the community may have read somewhere that without the regulating effects of serotonin, the amygdala and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) system can become overactive, leading to the physiological profile of a fearful or anxious individual. Fear may be a guiding force for these solitary individuals – fear of what may happen if they approach others in the community; fear of what may happen if they attempt to develop a nonfamilial relationship with another in the community; fear of leaving a negative impression on those who may judge their actions, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Or perhaps, some might believe that it is not fear that guides the behaviors of some of these solitary individuals. Instead, it might be proposed that some of these noninteracting individuals have a biological orientation that leads them to *prefer* a solitary existence. These individuals may feel more positively inclined when in the company of inanimate objects ... things. At this point, our second thought experience leaves us with the identification of two

“types” of solitary individuals: (1) those who are motivated by fear, the prospects of social appraisal, and heightened sensitivity to the possibility of rejection; and (2) those who have a distinct preference for solitude.

Regardless of the epidemiological “causes” of solitary behavior, in a society that has strong beliefs in the importance of cooperation, collaboration, and caregiving, it is likely that the majority of individuals who adhere to the cultural ethos would begin to think unpleasant thoughts about the noninteracting minority. They may think of solitary individuals as displaying unacceptable, discomfiting behavior; they may begin to feel negatively about them; they may discuss among themselves the need to exclude these noninteractors or to alter the behavior of these nonconforming individuals. Indeed, from the extant research, it is known that those who display behaviors considered to be inappropriate or abhorrent to the majority may be *isolated* by the group-at-large. And so now we have a third group of solitary individuals – those who have been isolated *by* the social group.

But how would these hypothetical community responses affect the nonsocial, nonconforming individual? What kinds of interactive/noninteractive cycles would be generated? And what would the solitary individuals think and feel about the larger community responses to them?

The Point

The preceding verbiage brings me to the singular message that I am attempting to convey. From “all of the above,” I am willing to step out on a limb to suggest, straight-out, that solitude can be punishing, humbling, debilitating, and destructive.

I do admit that it would be foolish to ignore the perspectives of those who have sung the praises of solitude.

This would include several authors of chapters in this compendium. It would also include the many beloved and respected authors, poets, painters, philosophers, spiritualists, and scientists who have suggested that their best work or their deepest thoughts derive from those moments when they are able to escape the madding crowd. Here are a few examples:

1 *"You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet."***Franz Kafka**

2 *"How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary seabird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here forever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself."*

Virginia Woolf

I could offer hundreds of quotations about the glories of solitude from rather well-known people. Nevertheless, from my perhaps distorted, limited, and ego-centered perspective, I find it difficult to believe that one can lead a productive and happy life locked in a closet, a cave, a tent, a room. Virginia Woolf committed suicide; Kafka had documented psychological difficulties vis-à-vis his inability to develop and maintain positive and supportive relationships with others. One may prefer solitude ... and many of us require solitude for contemplation, exploration, problem-solving, introspection, and the escape of pressures elicited by the social/academic/employment/political communities. As I noted in the opening paragraph, solitude may be an entirely acceptable pursuit. But this statement comes with several provisos.

The "ifs". If one spends time alone voluntarily, and if one can join a social group when one wants to, and if one can