

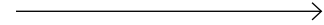
STAY OR LEAVE

CONTENTS



Introduction	7
1. Is it okay to want them to change?	11
2. Are we just too different?	15
3. Can people change?	21
4. Is it worth breaking up over sex?	25
5. What about the children?	31
6. Have we tried everything?	39
7. What if I end up lonely?	45
8. What if I just repeat the same mistakes?	55
9. Can I cope practically?	63
10. Who is rejecting whom?	69
11. Why do I continue to feel so stuck?	73
12. Why are they so puzzling?	77
13. What can you tell me to make me less scared of leaving?	85
14. Does it have to be a tragedy?	91
15. But I don't find them awful!	97
16. Do I have permission to do this?	101
17. Are my expectations too high?	105
18. How can I tell them?	113
19. How come they seem so lovely right now?	119
20. Why do I feel so nostalgic?	125
21. Is it okay to compromise?	131
22. How do I find closure?	135
23. Are there alternatives to staying or leaving?	139
24. Am I making a terrible mistake?	151

7. WHAT IF I END UP LONELY?



In the privacy of our minds, one shameful thought may haunt us as we evaluate whether to stay in or get out of an unsatisfactory relationship: What if we were to leave and end up in a place of terrible loneliness?

We're meant to be above such pragmatic worries. Only cowards and reprobates would mind a few weekends (or decades) by themselves. We've heard of those books that sing the praises of solitude (the divorcee who relocated to a solitary hut on a bare Scottish island; the person who went sailing around the world in a dinghy). But we can admit that we're not naturals at this sort of thing. There have been empty days when we almost lost our minds. There was one trip that we took on our own years back that was, behind the scenes, a psychological catastrophe. We're not really in a position to wave away the dangers of being left alone on a rock.

Without wishing to play down the dangers, there are one or two things we might learn to weaken our fears and thereby come to a clearer view of whether to stay or leave. We can begin with a simple observation: it is typically a lot

worse to be on our own on a Saturday than on a Monday night, and a lot worse to be alone over the festive period than at the end of the tax year. The physical reality and the length of time we're by ourselves may be identical, but the feeling that comes with being so is entirely different. This apparently negligible observation holds out a clue for a substantial solution to loneliness.

The difference between the Saturday and the Monday night comes down to the contrast between what being alone appears to mean on the two respective dates. On a Monday night, our own company feels as if it brings no judgement in its wake; it doesn't depart from the norms of respectable society; it's what's expected of decent people at the start of a busy week. We get back from work, make some soup, catch up on the post, do some emails and order a few groceries, without any sense of being unusual or cursed. The next day, when a colleague asks us what we got up to, we can relate the truth without any hot prickles of shame. It was just a Monday night, after all. But Saturday night finds us in a far more perilous psychological zone. We scan our phone for any sign of a last-minute invitation; we flick through the channels in an impatient and disconsolate haze; we are alive to our own tragedy as we eat tuna from a can; we take a long bath at 8.30 p.m. to try to numb the discomfort

inside with scalding heat on the outside; and as we prepare to turn out the light just after ten, the high-spirited cries of revellers walking by our house seem to convey a targeted tone of mockery and pity. On Monday morning, we pass over the whole horrid incident with haste.

From this, we conclude that being alone is bearable in relation to how 'normal' (that nebulous yet influential concept) the condition feels to us; it can either be a break from an honourably busy life, or sure evidence that we are an unwanted, wretched, disgusting and emotionally diseased being.

This is tricky but ultimately hopeful, for it suggests that if we could work on what being alone means to us, we could theoretically end up as comfortable in our own skin on a long summer Saturday night filled with the joyous cries of our fellow citizens as on the dreariest Monday in November. We could spend the whole holiday season by ourselves feeling as relaxed and as unselfconscious as we did when we were children and hung out for days by ourselves, tinkering with a project on our bedroom floor, with no thought that anyone would think us sad or shameful. We may not after all need a new companion (something that can be hard to find in a panic); we just need a new mindset (which

we can take care of by ourselves, starting right now).

To build ourselves a new mental model of what being alone should truly mean, we might rehearse a few of the following arguments:

i. Our solitude is willed

Despite what an unfriendly voice inside our heads might tell us, we are the ones who can choose whether or not to be alone. Assuming it's the latter, we could, if we wanted to, be in all sorts of company. Our solitude is willed rather than imposed. No one ever needs to be alone so long as they don't mind who they are with.

But we do mind, and we may have good reasons to do so. The wrong kind of company is much lonelier for us than being by ourselves – that is, it's further from what matters to us, more grating in its insincerity and more of a reminder of disconnection and misunderstanding than is the conversation we can have in the quiet of our own minds. Being alone is not proof that we have been rejected by the world; it's evidence that we've taken a good look at the available options and have – with wisdom – done some rejecting ourselves.

ii. Beware outward signs of companionship

It seems, from a distance, as if everyone is having an ecstatic time. The party (what we imagine in our darkest moments to be the unitary joyous social event from which we've been blocked) grips our imaginations. We've passed the restaurants and seen the groups leaning back in their chairs and laughing uproariously; we've seen the couples holding hands and the families packing up for their glorious holidays abroad. We know the depths of fun that are unfolding.

But we need to hold on to what we recognise in our sober moments is a more complicated reality: that there is going to be alienation at the restaurant, bitterness between the couples and despair in the sunny island hotels. We picture intimacy and communion, deep understanding and the most sophisticated varieties of kindness. We are sure that 'everyone' is having precisely what we understand by true love. But they are not. They will, for the most part, be together but still alone; they will be talking but largely not heard.

Isolation and grief are not unique to us; they are a fundamental part of the human experience. They trail every member of our species, whether in a couple or alone. We've chosen to experience

the pains of existence by ourselves for now, but having a partner has never protected anyone from the void for very long. We should take care to drown our individual sorrows in the ocean of a redemptive and darkly funny universal pessimism. No one is particularly enjoying the journey; we are not built that way. As we should never allow ourselves to forget in front of steamed-up restaurant windows, life is suffering for most of us for most of the time.

iii. We get statistics wrong

To compound our errors, we are the most hopeless statisticians. We should pin a notice to our kitchen wall reminding us of this. We say that ‘everyone’ is happy and ‘everyone’ is in a couple. But we need to properly evaluate what is going on in a statistical sense.

We are letting self-disgust, not mathematics, decide our vision of ‘normality’. If we really surveyed the question, if we grew wings and went up and examined the city, swooping in on this bedroom here and that office there, those families in the park and that couple on a date, we’d see something altogether different. We’d see millions of others like us and far worse: this one crying over a letter, that one shouting that they’ve had enough, this one complaining that

they can’t be understood, that one weeping in the bathroom over an argument. It is regrettable enough to be sad; we don’t need to compound the misery by telling ourselves – through a grave misunderstanding of statistics – that it is abnormal to be so.

iv. There is nothing shameful in what we’re doing

Our images of being alone lack dignity. We need better role models. Those on their own aren’t always the cobwebbed figures of our nightmares. Some of the greatest people who have ever lived have chosen, for a variety of noble reasons, to spend a lot of time by themselves. Out of self-compassion, we need to keep the difference between enforced and willed solitude firmly in consciousness. Here is a world-renowned scientist spending twenty years on their own to finish a book that will change everything. Here is one of the most beautiful people nature has yet produced, alone in their room, playing the piano, because their own company feels more peaceful than that of a jealous ex. Here is a politician who once led the nation, now preferring to commune with others through books. Those who are by themselves don’t comprise only the desperate cases; they number many of those one would feel most privileged to meet.

v. Understand your past

The sense of shame you experience at being in your own company normally comes from somewhere very particular: your own childhood, and, in particular, from an unloveable vision of yourself that you picked up in the early years. Somewhere in the past, someone left you feeling unworthy. Now, whenever you suffer a reversal, the story is ready to re-emerge, confirming what you think is a fundamental truth about you: that you don't deserve to exist. It's not essentially that you're afraid of being lonely; it's that you don't like yourself very much. The cure for this is immense sympathy and psychotherapeutic understanding, but not, perhaps, the company of a partner you no longer care for or respect.

Once we can like ourselves more, we won't need to be so scared of friendship with ourselves; we will know that others aren't laughing at us cruelly and that there is no delightful party we've been barred from. We'll appreciate that we can be both on our own and a fully dignified, legitimate member of the human race. We'll have conquered the terror of loneliness – and therefore, at last, we'll be in a position to assess our options correctly, without fear, and to choose

freely whether to stay in or leave the relationship we're in.