

# **Mental, emotional benefits to alone time in nature**

**By Brad Daniel, Andrew Bobilya and Ken Kalisc, The Conversation**

Today Americans live in a world that thrives on being busy, productive and overscheduled. Further, they have developed the technological means to be constantly connected to others and to vast options for information and entertainment through social media. For many, smartphones demand their attention day and night with constant notifications.

As a result, naturally occurring periods of solitude and silence that were once commonplace have been squeezed out of their lives. Music, reality TV shows, YouTube, video games, tweeting and texting are displacing quiet and solitary spaces. Silence and solitude are increasingly viewed as “dead” or “unproductive” time, and being alone makes many Americans uncomfortable and anxious.

But while some equate solitude with loneliness, there is a big difference between being lonely and being alone. The latter is essential for mental health and effective leadership.

We study and teach outdoor education and related fields at several colleges and organizations in North Carolina, through and with other scholars at 2nd Nature TREC, a training, research, education and consulting firm. We became interested in the broader implications of alone time after studying intentionally designed solitude experiences during wilderness programs, such as those run by Outward Bound. Our findings reveal that time alone in nature is beneficial for many participants in a variety of ways, and is something they wish they had more of in their daily life.

**Reflection and challenge**

We have conducted research for almost two decades on Outward Bound and undergraduate wilderness programs at Montreat College in North Carolina and Wheaton College in Illinois. For each program, we studied participants' experiences using multiple methods, including written surveys, focus group interviews, one-on-one interviews and field notes. In some cases, we asked subjects years later to look back and reflect on how the programs had affected them. Among other questions, our research looked at participant perceptions of the value of solo time outdoors.

Our studies showed that people who took part in these programs benefited both from the outdoor settings and from the experience of being alone. These findings build on previous research that has clearly demonstrated the value of spending time in nature.

Scholars in fields including wilderness therapy and environmental psychology have shown that time outdoors benefits our lives in many ways. It has a therapeutic effect, relieves stress and restores attention. Alone time in nature can have a calming effect on the mind because it occurs in beautiful, natural and inspirational settings.

Nature also provides challenges that spur individuals to creative problem-solving and increased self-confidence. For example, some find that being alone in the outdoors, particularly at night, is a challenging situation. Mental, physical and emotional challenges in moderation encourage personal growth that is manifested in an increased comfort with one's self in the absence of others.

Being alone also can have great value. It can allow issues to surface that people spend energy holding at bay, and offer an opportunity to clarify thoughts, hopes, dreams and desires. It provides time and space for people to step back, evaluate their lives and learn from their experiences. Spending time this way prepares them to re-engage with their community

relationships and full work schedules.

### **Putting it together: The outdoor solo**

Participants in programmed wilderness expeditions often experience a component known as "Solo," a time of intentional solitude lasting approximately 24-72 hours. Extensive research has been conducted on solitude in the outdoors because many wilderness education programs have embraced the educational value of solitude and silence.

Solo often emerges as one of the most significant parts of wilderness programs, for a variety of reasons. Alone time creates a contrasting experience to normal living that enriches people mentally, physically and emotionally. As they examine themselves in relation to nature, others, and in some cases, God, people become more attuned to the important matters in their lives and in the world of which they are part.

Solitary reflection enhances recognition and appreciation of key personal relationships, encourages reorganization of life priorities, and increases appreciation for alone time, silence, and reflection. People learn lessons they want to transfer to their daily living, because they have had the opportunity to clarify, evaluate and redirect themselves by setting goals for the future.

For some participants, time alone outdoors provides opportunity to consider the spiritual and/or religious dimension of life. Reflective time, especially in nature, often enhances spiritual awareness and makes people feel closer to God. Further, it encourages their increased faith and trust in God. This often occurs through providing ample opportunities for prayer, meditation, fasting, Scripture-reading, journaling and reflection time.

### **Retreating to lead**

As Thomas Carlyle has written, "In (solitary) silence, great things fashion themselves together." Whether these escapes are called alone time, solitude or Solo, it seems clear that humans experience many benefits when they retreat from the "rat race" to a place apart and gather their thoughts in quietness.

In order to live and lead effectively, it is important to be intentional about taking the time for solitary reflection. Otherwise, gaps in schedules will always fill up, and even people with the best intentions may never fully realize the life-giving value of being alone.

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