

Meg, a 24-year-old office assistant, freaks out at the mere thought of spending Friday night on her own.

“Whenever I’m by myself – even if it’s just while I’m walking to the shops – I have to be on the phone or checking Facebook,” she explains. “I can’t stand the silence of being alone. Someone has to hear my thoughts and ramblings.”

It’s a classic case of solophobia (a term we’ve invented because, well, we could).

The trouble is, whenever Meg is by herself, she starts to agonise over past events or worry about future ones: “What did my boss mean by that terse email? What if I lose my job? Why didn’t that guy ask me on a second date? What if I’m single forever?” Rather than appreciating the little things in the present moment, her brain is always panicking about imagined scenarios and she has become reliant on calling or texting her friends and family for some instant reassurance whenever these nasty thoughts strike.

Dr Simon Crisp, psychology lecturer at Monash University in Victoria and director of neopsychology.com.au, has seen first-hand how new technologies have enabled this kind of high-maintenance overanalysing. “In the past, we couldn’t instantly get in touch with people every time we had a momentary pang of concern – we had to console ourselves. When people don’t put their energy into creating a rich solitary life, they feel lost whenever they’re not with others,” says Crisp. “It’s really important to enjoy your own company. You don’t want to let others define you,” he adds. “The reality is, we like those people who are really clear about who they are and aren’t constantly seeking reassurance.”

the path of distraction.

The good news for Meg (and her family and friends) is that you can train yourself to stop hurtling down the “what if?” path. “When you notice that you’re getting alarmed about a past event or something that might happen in the future, bring

yourself back to the present instead of contacting someone for comfort. You can easily do this by taking notice of your surroundings – it can be as simple as saying to yourself, ‘Those trees look so beautiful in the sun’,” says Crisp. Alternately, distract yourself. Immerse yourself in a great book or film, write a journal, or go for a walk. Just do anything that you can enjoy alone.

when you just need to be alone.

Fear of missing out (or FOMO, if you’re acronym-inclined) also makes people dread alone time – no-one wants to miss a party that’ll go down in social history. That said, isn’t it worse to rock up to the most stylish spot in town with a vicious flu purely for FOMO’s sake?

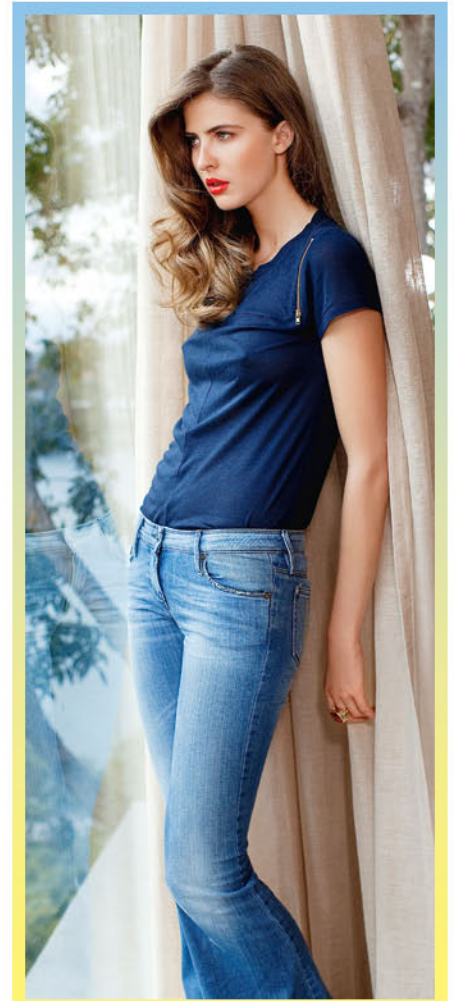
“People can feel a lot of pressure to miss out on anything, just in case they slip behind in people’s expectations,” says Crisp. “This creates a ‘social treadmill’ situation, where we worry that our social status will diminish if we’re not constantly in some sort of contact.” The solution? Value your own needs and time as much as those of your mates. If you have a sore tummy, relish the chance to fall asleep on the couch in front of a trashy chick-flick. Feeling shattered after a hectic week at work? There’s no shame in doing a yoga class, having a glass of red, and going to bed at 8.30pm on a Friday night.

“An important distinction to make is that being alone is not the same as being lonely,” says Crisp. “We’re all a mixture of introvert and extrovert – we need to know where our individual balance lies.”

American journalist and activist Jonathan Rauch has his social equilibrium perfected: “Leave an extrovert alone for two minutes and they’ll soon reach for the phone. In contrast, after an hour or two of being socially ‘on,’ we introverts need to turn off and recharge. My own formula is roughly two hours alone for every hour of socialising. This isn’t antisocial. It isn’t a sign of depression. It does not call for medication. For introverts, to be alone with our thoughts is just as restorative

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as sleeping, and as nourishing as eating. My motto? ‘I’m okay, you’re okay – in small doses.’” Most people’s introvert-to-extrovert ratio is somewhere in between, says Crisp. They’re content to be home alone, but equally happy to party until 2am when the occasion arises. Like anything in life, it’s all about balance. ➔





kind of negative self-talk really won't help you on your quest for solitary fulfilment. "Being able to stay positive and upbeat about yourself when you're alone is a valuable life skill to learn," says Crisp. A personal cheer squad isn't always available, so being able to see the glass half full, irrespective of the company you're in, creates remarkable resilience. According to Crisp, this comes in handy during the tough times – things like going through a break-up and dealing with illness or bereavement.

valuing your own company.

At the opposite end of the solophobia spectrum is Sarah, a 31-year-old project manager. Her 30th birthday present to herself was a solo holiday at a Byron Bay, NSW, health retreat. "I'd wanted to go there for ages. I invited my best friend and sister to come, but they couldn't get the cash together in time, so I decided I'd book it anyway. I have a really demanding job where I'm constantly dealing with people, so a few days alone always feels a bit luxurious," she says.

It's not that she's a hermit. "I love seeing my friends and family, but I also feel really recharged after spending some quality time with myself," she says. "After a full-on project at work, my idea of heaven is a few days on an empty beach with a good book." Sarah knows what she needs to function well, and Crisp says that this kind of self-awareness is a great advantage.

"Having rewarding and nurturing relationships with loved ones is important, but so is being comfortable in your own skin. In fact, feeling good inside will make your relationships better, because you'll be a calmer, more grounded person," he says. So, if you've been planning a round-the-world trip for years, but you keep putting it off because you can't find a travel partner, it might be time to take a big, deep breath and stride purposefully down to the travel agent. A bit of flying solo could be exactly what you need. □

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"i feel like such a loser!"

Kindergarten teacher Emma, 26, can't even fathom the idea of going to the movies by herself – even if it's something she's desperate to see. "I'd just be so self-conscious. I'd worry about all those people looking at me and thinking, 'Who's that loser sitting over there by herself? I wonder why no-one wants to hang out with her?'"

Fear of judgement from others is another cause of solophobia. But this

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