

The many faces of the solitude

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Editorial

Solitude as a way of life is a rather unusual condition, which may create a special psychological atmosphere leading either to depression or to inner freedom. Many authors, from antiquity to our era, philosophers,¹⁻⁵ psychologists,^{6,7} and poets,⁸ attempted to describe the influence of solitude on human psychology,⁹ psychosomatic homeostasis, behavior, productivity, interior harmony, and peace from various points of view, projecting frequently their feelings, principles, perspectives, and their concept of life.^{10,11}

Some of the authors describe solitude as a depressive or rather tragic way of life, with harmful consequences for human homeostasis, though others consider it as a valuable source of inner peace, self-knowledge, interior harmony, and even creativity.¹² To understand the polymorphic influence of solitude upon the inner life of the soul and on human behavior, it is important to know the etiology or the motivation of the solitude, the environmental circumstances,¹³ and the psychological background of the person who lives in solitude.

For the large majority of men, who live in isolation, solitude means an unpleasant, painful traumatic experience, though for others it is an opportunity for further self-concentration, self-knowledge, self-control, meditation, and long tranquility. Solitude may also be a practical way to the truth, whenever it is imposed by the free will of the person.¹⁴ In some stages of life, such as adolescence, the human being in periods of emotional fluctuations, contradictions, and social insecurity,¹⁵ searches for solitude¹⁶ to regain emotional stability, and self-identification, which might contribute substantially to a deeper understanding of his role in society.¹⁷

Particularly, in late adolescence, solitude may be beneficial, as a condition of inner fulfilment.¹⁸ The phenomenon of the social isolation of children and adolescents in our era, due to their fixation on the “miraculous word of the internet” could be explained by their desire to escape from a traumatic social reality, which is plenty of conflict and misunderstanding.

In senility, solitude is a very painful experience affecting greatly the quality of life of elderly people.¹⁹ Naturally, aging is the stage of advanced physical, and mental maturity, and existential identification. The person in senility is plenty of experience, wisdom, and justification of most of his life expectations. In advanced age, the human being needs respect, kindness, understanding, care, and emotional stability.²⁰ Unfortunately, elderly people live frequently in nursing homes, detached from their families, relatives, friends, and familiar environment, facing the bitter experience of social isolation²¹ and emotional starvation. However, some western European countries, have attempted recently to ameliorate the quality of life of elderly people, by organizing small communities of private homes, replacing therefore the impersonal depressive large institutions.²²

In patients who suffer from dementia, the isolation has tragic consequences, with serious psychosomatic dimensions. In an advanced stage of the disease, the patients are imprisoned in a “timeless time”,

and a “functionless reality”.²³ It is well known that the communication of the person with his environment and his prompt and rational interaction with society is a crucial factor for brain activation and maintenance of cognition,²⁴ whereas the proper emotional atmosphere enhances the inner life of the patient.

It is reasonable, therefore, that the social isolation of the demented people, at any stage of the disease, causes a rapid decline in the mental faculties, affecting neuronal plasticity and leading to further global aggravation of the mental capacities,²⁵ without any further perspective, due to irreversible and devastating character of the neurodegenerating causes of dementia.

The consequences of senso-sensorial and emotional deprivation in patients who suffer from dementia are much more obvious in their art products, particularly in paintings.²⁶ Their pictures demonstrate an oversimplification of the colors and shapes and a marked transformation of the faces,²⁷ which are motionless, inexpressive, rigid, and bizarre, showing the unpleasant condition of the inner life of the patients.^{28,29} Based on the creations of the patients, it seems that art therapy, particularly painting, would be beneficial, in case that is applied at the initial stages of the disease.³⁰

Healthy persons who wish for solitude as a mode of life, desiring to live in peace, serenity, and self-identification³¹ the proper utilization of every moment could protect them from sadness and sense of vanity and feeling of the existential insufficiency,³² which may occur initially³³ Later on, as time advances the beneficial contribution of solitude to inner peace and authentic existence becomes obvious. The person in solitude by his will, usually feels inner harmony, tranquility, simplicity, freedom, real love, and compassion for humanity, As soon as solitude offers the first spiritual fruits, the person may be involved in social activity playing a very positive and beneficial role.³⁴ The solitude as a way of life beyond the hard competition, the turbulence, the social dispute, the contradictions, the economic discrepancies, and the emotional distress, may offer an existentially genuine life in peace, and plenty of spiritual and intellectual contemplation.^{34,35}

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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