

# Solitude is a Gift – Enjoy it, Maximize it



By Joan Michelson

**D**o you enjoy your own company? Really. Do you?

Many of us have been spending a lot of time alone lately due to the pandemic (unless of course, you have kids living at home, in which case you probably wish you had more time alone). If you are an essential worker—whether in healthcare, a grocery store or pharmacy, a transit worker, a first responder or in law enforcement, or the like—thank you for all you do every day in this public health crisis and always.

30-45, 18.6% of women 46-60, 31.8% of women 51-75, and 46.6% of women 76 and older live alone.

We can see being alone as miserable and waste time complaining, or we can see being alone as the gift of quiet time—an opportunity to enjoy and appreciate our own company. A time to get to know ourselves better. In her best-selling book, “Intimacy and Solitude,” psychotherapist Dr. Stephanie Dowrick calls it “welcoming time with your own self as you might welcome time with a friend.”

have started baking bread during this pandemic that markets are running out of flour.

I wrote in *Forbes* about the many ways we can use this pandemic forced-isolation time productively and to grow our careers. Those links are at the end of this article.

## No. 2 – Write

You can write, even if you are not a writer and/or do not want to write a book. One of the most important ways to build your brand today and demonstrate your knowledge and expertise to attract new opportunities is to write blogs and articles about your field and post them on LinkedIn and/or Medium (free), where many people can see them. Also, post them on social media and your own website, if you have one.

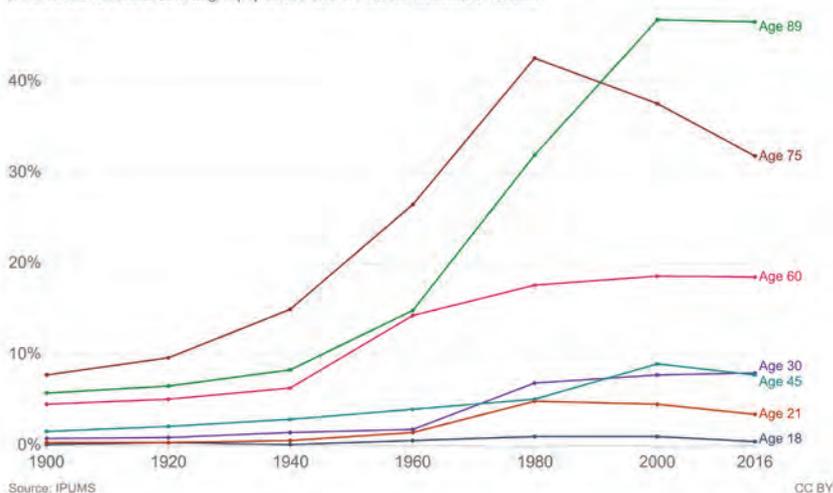
You can also write for your own personal development in a journals. For example, you can write letters to people you will never send something to or someone who passed on. This can help process emotions that are coming up during this extended time alone.

Maybe you want to write about losing people, or about getting more perspective on the importance of our health, or about how you miss people you cannot see in person right now because of COVID-19. Maybe you want to write about how you feel about your job, work or business, even your kids, spouse/partner or someone you are dating—whatever topic comes up.

Writing is so helpful that “journaling” has become a verb commonly used in therapeutic circles. I find that just getting something out of my head and on to paper is a relief. I also often find a difference between what I thought I was going to write and what I ended up writing, giving me more insight. I call it the alchemy between mind and fingertips.

## Percentage of females living alone in the United States, by age, 1900 to 2016

The share of female Americans living alone, by age. An individual is defined as living alone where there is one person in the household and does not live in group quarters. See the source tab for more details.



We all miss seeing our friends and families, traveling and dining out freely, and going to concerts, movies, sports events or the theatre. We are social beings, and it is especially stressful when we need to be alone to protect ourselves, when it is literally a matter of health and safety.

According to the most recent U.S. Census, 36 million people in the United States live alone, across all age groups. That is 11% of the total U.S. population—or more than one in 10 people. Women live alone in much greater numbers than ever, too. According to [OurWorldInData.org](https://ourworldindata.org), approximately 7.8% of women ages

How we look at things is our choice. Here are five ways being alone can be an opportunity:

## No. 1 – Tackle important or delayed projects

Being in solitude helps you focus and concentrate, so it is a good time to do in-depth projects that require that kind of intense focus, like writing a book, developing a course or making furniture. You can fix something in your home you have wanted to fix, or even mend mildly torn clothing (don't you hate holes in your socks?), garden or cook. So many people

### No. 3 – Think Creatively

Free-associating, questioning and experimenting are three of the four keys to the “Innovators’ DNA,” defined by the late-great Clayton Christensen in his seminal book of the same name. As high-achievers in the Lead Up for Women community, we have our own ideas, probably lots of them.

We spend so much time reacting to and being distracted by other people’s ideas, agendas, stories, news and priorities—or what our friends, colleagues and business associates are posting on social media—that we can lose sight of our own ideas, and of what we want. Our inboxes are full of other people’s agendas and priorities. As Dr. Carter wrote in that Psychology Today article, “It’s hard to think of effective solutions to problems when you’re distracted by incoming information, regardless of whether the source is electronic or human.”

This time alone is an opportunity to listen to our own ideas and solutions. We can let our minds free-associate when

## How to redesign and accelerate your career

This is an excerpt of Joan Michelson’s forthcoming book (due out in 2021) on how we can redesign the career and work ecosystem to accelerate women’s careers. It is based on hundreds of interviews with women innovators and leaders for her podcast, “Green Connections Radio” (on every podcast platform), and from her articles in Forbes, HuffPost, TheAtlantic.com, Career2.0, The New Economy and network news, including “60 Minutes.” The book also features insights from her personal experience as a leader in Fortune 500 companies and as a journalist in major media organizations.

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taking a walk, speaking our ideas into the voice memos on our smartphones or jotting them down so we do not lose them. It is important to keep pads and pens by our beds and couches to make notes of ideas that pop up randomly, even as we mindlessly watch Netflix.

Studies show that solutions to vexing challenges often pop up when

we are not thinking about them, or when something unrelated triggers an idea. You never know where it might lead. I have developed ground-breaking partnerships that way, or come up with ways to approach a client issue or an idea to write about. Psychologists call brainstorming your own ideas “brainwriting.”

# Learn. Serve. Lead.



**Lead Up for Women** is proud to present this exceptional opportunity to **travel to Guatemala April 15th-26th for an 11-day / 10-night service trip** in the settings of the Mayan Villages and discover the most beautiful places in Guatemala! This trip will include learning from the Mayan Women, serving alongside them, then, in turn, teaching the Mayan Women. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to activate your learning, service, and leadership globally.



For more information or to register, visit [www.localhope.org/Volunteer](http://www.localhope.org/Volunteer)  
**See:** Lead Up for Women’s Journey to Guatemala: “Learn, Serve, Lead!”

#### No. 4 — Increase self-awareness

“One of the great pleasures of solitude is that it gives you a chance to take a rest from seeing yourself through other people’s eyes—or how you are imagining other people are seeing you—and to discover how you feel on the inside about your own self.”

To be a better person, mother, wife, sister, daughter, friend, boss, employee, student, researcher, entrepreneur or athlete—any role—we need to understand what is in our own minds and hearts, and separate ourselves from what anyone else thinks. Every leadership guru and successful person from Oprah, Jack Canfield, Brendon Burchard or Ellen DeGeneres will tell you how important self-awareness is. Yet, it is sorely lacking in today’s society, as we fill every second with other people’s input.

Being alone is an opportunity to tune out the noise of others and tune in to yourself, your own thoughts, ideas and feelings.

We can hear how we sound when we talk to people, notice the words we choose, what we eat (or don’t), how we exercise (or don’t), how we clean and maintain our homes and possessions (or don’t), and how we spend our time. I have my coaching clients keep a time log for a week, recording literally everything—sleep, eating, FaceTime with friends, etc.). It is always enlightening.

Most importantly, listen to your self-talk. Do you beat yourself up or talk to yourself as your BFF? I realized through working with a terrific, brave coach several years ago that I was beating myself up. When we talk kindly and compassionately to ourselves, we relate to people better, achieve our goals faster, and therefore, save a lot of time, frustration and energy. We become a better person.

Us Type-A people think that being hard on ourselves helps us do great work. But when you beat yourself up, you actually get in your own way. You know the thoughts I am talking about. Those self-destructive thoughts drain your energy, kill your self-esteem and self-confidence, and make you feel stupid and insecure, which unconsciously seeps into your conversations, tone of voice and actions.

#### No. 5 — Enable healing

We need to know how we really feel, not how others tell us we “should” feel. Being alone, we can process our emotions and circumstances we face, think through a

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problem. Counsel ourselves by asking what we would tell a friend or colleague in that situation or with that feeling.

Alone-time can be an opportunity to gain perspective and process things we may have ignored—things that creep up again in the silence (working with a coach or therapist is good to maximize healing those, too). Dr. Shoba Sreenivasan and Dr. Linda E. Weinberger call it “emotional nourishment” in *Psychology Today*.

Separating from others can enhance our relationships, too. As psychologist Dr. Sherrie Bourg Carter wrote in *Psychology Today*, “Solitude can enhance the quality of your relationships with others. By spending time with yourself and gaining a better understanding of who you are and what you desire in life, you’re more likely to make better choices about who you want to be around.”

“Spend your life in your own way.” Use this time to find out what that is and move it forward.

One of my best friends gave me a birthday card many years ago that

featured a quote from 16th Century playwright Christopher Marlowe. The quote said, “There is only one success – to be able to spend life in your own way.” The quote is prominently displayed in my home.

To do so, we need to know and feel what “our own way” is. That requires introspection, knowing yourself, and what you really want to do. Then, you can use the gift of time by yourself and mine your creative ideas. Do things you have wanted to do, like write a book, play or novel, create art or work in your garden. Express yourself “in your own way.”

Being alone is key to finding out what you truly want, separate from “them,” and from the noise. It can be a time of tremendous self-awareness, creativity and productivity. It can move you forward exponentially in many ways. It also can be a time of binge-eating, binge-watching, being a sloth and feeling miserable.

It is all in how you look at it, and that’s your choice. ↑

### Want to hear more from Joan?

**Joan’s Forbes blogs:** [forbes.com/sites/joanmichelson2](https://forbes.com/sites/joanmichelson2)

#### Using pandemic time as an opportunity

[forbes.com/sites/joanmichelson2/2020/03/14/10-ways-to-use-working-remotely-or-self-quarantining-as-an-opportunity/](https://forbes.com/sites/joanmichelson2/2020/03/14/10-ways-to-use-working-remotely-or-self-quarantining-as-an-opportunity/)

#### Using pandemic time for your career

[forbes.com/sites/joanmichelson2/2020/05/25/10-career-tips-for-leveraging-the-pandemic-shutdown/#5af5a9de4d33](https://forbes.com/sites/joanmichelson2/2020/05/25/10-career-tips-for-leveraging-the-pandemic-shutdown/#5af5a9de4d33)

#### Resources:

[ourworldindata.org/grapher/percentage-of-females-living-alone-in-the-united-states-by-age](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/percentage-of-females-living-alone-in-the-united-states-by-age)

[vox.com/the-highlight/2020/5/19/21221008/how-to-bake-bread-pandemic-yeast-flour-baking-ken-forkish-claire-saffitz](https://vox.com/the-highlight/2020/5/19/21221008/how-to-bake-bread-pandemic-yeast-flour-baking-ken-forkish-claire-saffitz)

[stephaniedowrick.com/published-works/books/intimacy-solitude-3/](https://stephaniedowrick.com/published-works/books/intimacy-solitude-3/)

[psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201201/6-reasons-you-should-spend-more-time-alone](https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201201/6-reasons-you-should-spend-more-time-alone)

[psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-nourishment/201812/the-benefits-spending-time-alone](https://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-nourishment/201812/the-benefits-spending-time-alone)

[psychologytoday.com/us/experts/shoba-sreenivasan-phd-and-linda-e-weinberger-phd](https://psychologytoday.com/us/experts/shoba-sreenivasan-phd-and-linda-e-weinberger-phd)

[psychologicalscience.org/news/minds-business/theres-a-better-way-to-brainstorm.html#.WMntwBlyvBI](https://psychologicalscience.org/news/minds-business/theres-a-better-way-to-brainstorm.html#.WMntwBlyvBI)