

Am I the Only One?

Even though I understand that there are more of us who are single, how does that help me feel less alone and different, if all my friends are partnered? As humans, we are influenced by what others in our particular reference group are doing. In addition, most of us have internalized a timeframe of when we are going to do things in our adult lives and these ideas are shaped by what is valued in our culture, social group, and family. For some of us, being single at age 19 is desired, but at age 28 is no longer valued. Being “**on or off time**” in relation to these markers impacts how we view ourselves and others around us. (Neugarten, *et. al.* 1977).

In many cultures (and on many timelines of adult development), single-hood is depicted as a temporary way station, not the fully lived adult life. Real adult life occurs in marriage, with children, and in the suburbs! However, as the statistics above suggest, this view of the “marginal” or “off-time” single appears to be increasingly outdated. Nonetheless, if you grew up in a family or subculture that places a high value on marriage and children, you may feel considerable conflict. If you have few positive models of single adults and you are surrounded by friends that are partnered, you can feel different, off track, and worry that something is wrong with you even if your life is full and rich. (Schwartzberg, *et. al.*, 1995) ;(Lewis, 2001).

Rituals are an important way that cultures acknowledge our accomplishments, value, and maturity. Some of the most common and universal rituals are attached to developmental milestones, such as birthdays, anniversaries, the birth of a child, or housewarming parties. Many rituals link marriage with achieving adult status. For example, gifts are showered on those who are engaged, married or become parents. Hallmark has not yet established Aunts’ or Uncles’ day. Best friends often do not have the formal or visible role in major rites such as funerals, while busy body Aunt Mary will often have a place at the lectern.

Kaye Collier McLaughlin, who originated the Solo Flight program within the Episcopal Church, has this to say about rituals:

“One of the hardest things for newly single people is realizing how few rituals and ceremonies there are for the lives of single people. Rituals and traditions are public statements that something significant has happened in our lives, which we want to mark in the company of those who will help us keep our commitment. Our markers {as single people} will be different...but it is

extremely important for us to realize that there are such markers, and to claim them for our own, and celebrate them.”

So how single adults are often regarded? We can get a glimpse as we look at the images in the popular media. They are shopping obsessed (Bridget Jones), lonely (The Lonely Guy), or romantically obsessed (Fatal Attraction). Although there are increasingly more interesting examples of the hero or heroine who chooses to be single (Washington Square), most often in the “romantic comedy” storyline, marriage is the necessary conclusion of the search for connection, purpose and security.

The idea that there is something wrong with being (and remaining) single is captured in the frequent questions confronting single people “So have you met anyone yet? You are such a nice, intelligent and attractive person, I don’t get it.” or “He must be afraid of commitment!” Rather than asking yourself “Why aren’t I married?” the question should be “Why is an adequate explanation felt to be necessary?” After all, the possession of basic personality flaws, poor role models, and fears of commitment could characterize a lot of married people as well. Only when either status (married or single) can be equally causally questioned, as in ‘You’re such a good looking (bright, fun) person, why did you ever get married?’ will we know that single-hood has achieved social authenticity.” (Schwartzberg et.al., Single in a Married World, p 84)

But we can easily feel like victims if we focus solely on the impact of social judgment and familial contexts. Adult maturity is the acceptance that those judgments and ideals exist in our past, and quite possibly in our present, and become the matrix within which we develop our own self judgments. Our internalized judgments color how we view ourselves and the situations we encounter and can exert a profound influence on how we live our lives. But since these judgments are inside of us, it means we can change them to be more workable and congruent with the reality of who we really are and how we chose to see ourselves.

How do we know if we have internalized self-judgment about our singleness? If Aunt Mary’s comments continually “get to us” and we feel like we have to defend ourselves, it means we are getting triggered or hooked. It doesn’t mean that her comments aren’t annoying, unsupportive, nor insensitive, but we don’t have to let another’s judgments shape how we think about ourselves. It is our interpretation of what it means to be single that can ultimately inhibit and control us, whether or not others are judging us.

For some, being single may mean an exciting place to have choice and possibility; for others, it may mean disappointment. For many, it may feel like a bit of both. (Cole, 1999; Lewis, 2001)

But we have to recognize that singleness is just singleness, and the real question is how can we make it work for us by recognizing and detaching from the meanings that weigh us down. (You may want to read more about this in the Expectations: If Only...section of MySingleSpace). We think the problem is that we are single, when really it may be that we are feeling discouraged, feeling something is wrong with us, feeling isolated and longing for meaningful connections with others, or wanting to feel a sense of belonging. All these feelings can happen if you are single or partnered. Indeed, it is important to disentangle all these ways we may confound singleness with how we are managing our lives, because this then gives us an opening to make some real changes.

If you are interested in reading more about this topic, you may want to return to the annotated **Resources and Links for Stigma and Stereotypes in My Single Space**.

References:

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