

## EMOTIONAL PITFALLS IN SINGLESPLACE

Certain ideas frequently crop up that can hinder our fulfillment and satisfaction in SingleSpace. This section takes a look at some of the assumptions and attitudes that can get in the way of creating a powerful and enjoyable life as single person. They include:

### **1. Confusing alone with feeling lonely or isolated.**

One of the challenges in being human is feeling and being alone. Although being single allows you opportunities for pleasurable solitude, it can at times feel like uncomfortable isolation. It is important to distinguish “alone-positive” from “lonely-negative.” “Alone-positive” are those times when you relish having time to read a book, decorate the way you want, or lose yourself in contemplation. Enjoying your own space is “alone positive.”

In contrast, loneliness connotes a feeling of being out of connection with others and can happen whether you are with people or not. Indeed if you feel fundamentally connected with others being alone may not feel lonely and unpleasant. For example, if you are in a strange city but know you can call your best friend, it feels much less frightening or upsetting than being alone and knowing no-one. Even having just one good friend, with whom we can talk, can shift our perception of our self and our circumstances.

We can get locked in “lonely negative” when we withdraw and become more isolated. This can happen when we are ashamed or feel that there is something fundamentally wrong with us that causes us to be alone. It can also happen if we withdraw or avoid others because we fear judgment and rejection.

“Lonely negative” and being out of connection with others can feel frightening to people because they fear it will never end and they are helpless to change their circumstance. People will work hard to avoid those feelings. However, some of the ways in which people try to avoid loneliness can paradoxically isolate them and maintain or create more disconnection. Some examples are: staying in unhealthy relationships just to feel connected; compulsively dating; staying at work all the time and then being too exhausted to do anything else; “to do” listing; being socially frenzied (if it is Tuesday night, I have to have plans...); drinking, shopping etc.

All of these activities can leave you feeling empty and still lonely. Instead it is more effective if you can be aware and accepting of the unpleasant feeling of

loneliness or disconnection and use this discomfort to move towards more authentic connection. (See "Open to Love" and "Creating Connections" in MySingleSpace.)

Another pitfall for singles is to assume that finding "the relationship" with a partner will fix the "lonely-negative." This is evident in the all or nothing thinking of idealizing marriage and partnership. "When I get married, I no longer will feel this sense of disconnection and loneliness." A relationship or marriage is not the panacea to feeling lonely, as many people in failed (and successful) partnerships will attest. This is not to say there may not be benefits to married life but idealizing these positives can increase loneliness and the feeling of "being on the outside looking in." You have to remind yourself that there are also many positives to single life and it is the positives you are going to build on and the minuses you are going to accept, compensate for and deal with creatively.

## **2. Being passive, putting your life on hold until "real adult life" begins**

"If only's..." are a symptom of passivity, one of the most problematic coping styles that can lead to both complaining and the experience of feeling and being stuck. Being passive means putting your life on hold, waiting for someone else or circumstances to change, and waiting for life to begin. For the single person, a passive approach to life can take the form of:

**Waiting for the** phone to ring, waiting for a relationship to do fun things, waiting for "the" relationship to set up a sense of home and connectedness, waiting for him or her to "be the perfect relationship";

**Putting off** getting a home, or a pet, with the idea that this might jinx one's prospect of a relationship (yes, some of us have thought that way!);

**Avoiding** situations that might involve risk or rejection; instead, passively hoping that Prince or Princess Charming will ring the doorbell;

**Holding onto** a certain script of how our lives (and our relationships) should look, and stubbornly holding out, thinking only then can we enjoy ourselves and be happy.

It has been frequently suggested that to counteract this "putting life on hold" tendency, we need to carefully look at our dreams and goals, assess what is possible to create on our own, and begin to take steps towards where we want to

be. It also means looking at the positives we associate with being single, and “working them.”

You may come up with an exciting and interesting set of goals if you do this. It might include: creating a “home,” planning trips, organizing your own birthday party, adopting a child, or buying flowers on Valentine’s Day just to feel special. It may mean shifting your role within your family to hosting Thanksgiving dinners instead of always going to your married brother’s home. Or it might mean going on a trip with other singles during the holidays.

### **3. Making choices from outdated maps and scripts.**

Often we create rigid notions of how we can fulfill our desires and longings. For example, I can only feel maternal if I have a child. However, it is possible to direct our caretaking and maternal impulses in a variety of directions (e.g. a puppy, a nephew, a group of friends that one nurtures, a “little brother,” a volunteer project.). We may find opportunities for parenting as a single mom or dad. It may be that we thought we would have to be with a certain kind of partner (e.g. he has to be just like me). However, we may find many different possible partners with very different characteristics who are compatible with us. Indeed, one of the gifts of being single is the opportunity to explore, be open to possibilities, and be creative.

### **4. Falling into the trap of letting guilt or fear get in the way of defining and doing things for yourself or, alternatively, the trap of feeling entitled that others should take care of you**

There are several issues that can get in the way of our taking care of ourselves and taking charge of our life. Guilt paralyzes some of us. It may take the form of fear that we are selfish and self-indulgent if we treat ourselves well. Or it may be the feeling that we don’t deserve to have what we need or want. On the other hand, for some of us we may “put life on hold” because we feel a sense of entitlement. I don’t want to do these things for myself because I am unconsciously waiting for someone else to take care of me; I have waited long enough, it should happen already!

### **5. Living from “what’s wrong with me that I am single” rather than “who am I and what do I want to create in my life!”**

Shame is a potent barrier that robs us of fulfillment and joy. It is associated with blaming ourselves for being single and feeling there is something wrong with us

that we are single. If you worry something is wrong with you, you anticipate rejection and judgment and you may protect yourself by avoiding potentially uncomfortable social situations. Withdrawing creates even more isolation and shame. Ironically, out of the fear that “people are judging me” or “I will feel odd man (or woman) out,” we can avoid situations and experiences that help us correct our misperceptions, restore confidence and build connections.

For example, if you consistently avoid going to the parties where you fear you might be the only one unattached, you forego opportunities that move you towards creating community and feeling part of life (rather than on the outside looking in).

As a single person, it is important to recognize any conscious or unconscious scripts or other psychological barriers that hold you back from “blooming where you are” and taking an active approach towards creating the life you want. Instead of putting things on hold while waiting for the perfect partner, the “right” circumstances or waiting until you make yourself perfect (so you will never be rejected!), it means addressing one’s true needs in real, present-time ways.

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