

Loneliness and why it can be your biggest gift. Warning, long read!

OK, so you've ended up single in your mid life and this isn't where you expected or wanted to be. Fear not, you're not alone. Every year, thousands of mid-lifers end up single either by choice or by circumstance and have some trepidation about the future. I want to remove that trepidation and inspire you to leap at this chance to change your life for the better.

Firstly, some facts, garnered from respected research institutions:

- a. Loneliness & seclusion have become a global public health crisis
- b. In Britain, 5% of adults – 2.6 million people admitted to feeling lonely
- c. 35% of the UK population is now single
- d. 22% of the above falls into the 40+ age group – that's 5.2 million single people - just like you and me
- e. Being lonely can be as dangerous for your health as having high blood pressure or smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- f. People who experience chronic loneliness are likely to be in more mental stress than those who do not (NB: I personally want to caveat this fact: Not every single person experiences chronic loneliness)
- g. Quality of social relationships matters more than the quantity of relationships
- h. Feeling part of a group where you have shared values and interests can help you feel less depressed & increase happiness levels.
- i. When people feel they have social support, they have faster recovery from trauma or illness.
- j. Happiness is catching & self perpetuating.

So why am I saying that loneliness can be your biggest gift? Well, quite simply because I hope it will motivate you to change your life for the better; seize the moment to live for the here & now, become your own person instead of a wife, a mother, a husband, a father, a son, daughter, an employee or employer but also discover who you are now, in mid-life and be excited about the future.

Being single brings many things but my personal favourites are:

- a. Freedom
- b. Choice
- c. Opportunities

So many of my married friends envy the freedom I have to sleep alone, eat bread and jam for dinner if I choose and the travel plans I make, often at the spur of the moment.

As a single mid-lifer, instead of looking at what you don't have, celebrate what you do have:

- a. More wisdom than you did in your 20's
- b. More technology to support your ambitions than when we were growing up
- c. Fewer responsibilities (hopefully)

I certainly never expected to be single in my late 40's, never mind as I hit the big six oh like I did earlier this year. But quite honestly, I'm thriving in this amazing solo state and I set up Jetty Socials to inspire others to enjoy being solo and to maximise this time of life.

If you have just come out of a relationship, or god forbid, you've been bereaved, I do understand. I experienced both and you will need a time of adjustment, the length of which will differ for each person. Please don't expect to make this journey in any set time, especially those who have lost a loved one and had to bear the weight of a funeral and caring for others. For some people, coming

out the other side will take a matter of a few months, for others it may take a few years and for some, decades. Go at your own pace but allow yourself to try new things and don't feel guilty for experiencing joyous moments along the way, no matter how simple they might be.

Being *good* at being single does take practice, and by being *good*, I mean enjoying it, feeling at peace with your status and having a degree of confidence in your choices.

Here are my top tips for living a joyous, single existence.

1. Embrace it – no matter if it wasn't your choice, embrace the freedom you now have. Don't wallow in the past and what might have been, face the future with a positive outlook. It might take baby steps, celebrating the fact that no one woke you up snoring, or the fact that you have less washing to do!

And when you do realise there is are upsides to the solo life, high five the moments or if that's a little too hippy dippy for you, write it down, keep a journal. Whilst I've never quite got the hang of proper journalling, I do run a rather protracted 'Notes' library on my phone and try to record moments or experiences of joy– such as a quote I see or a song I hear. Keeping these 'happy lists', especially as we get older and perhaps a bit forgetful, are invaluable for those slightly darker moments when you might need to seek out a prompt of a jolly good kick up the jacksy!

2. Make your home work for you. If you are still raising children or looking after elderly relatives, carve out a space for yourself where you are surrounded with joyous things. Like Marie Condo, 'if it (what surrounds you) doesn't spark joy, get rid of it'. A few years ago, I wanted to move, I fell out of love with my house but couldn't afford the riverside flat I was lusting over. A friend recommended that I speak to an interiors designer who helped me recalibrate my upstairs rooms to totally work for me. Instead of losing one of my spare bedrooms to a guest bedroom which only got used occasionally, it is now a glorious dressing room which I love to use every day. My bedroom also had a makeover bringing me calm at bedtime. These simple tweaks helped me fall back in love with my house and enjoy living there. I still have room for guests, but the upstairs now works for me too.
3. If you feel lonely sometimes, recognise that it's ok and don't beat yourself up about it, tell someone. Pick up the phone, write an email, or go and see a mate. The worst thing I did when in this state was keep it to myself. I felt ashamed, after all people thought of me as having it all, being a successful career woman, having a lovely home and having lots of friends. I feared that if I showed my vulnerability, I would somehow be diminished in their eyes, I felt weak, I felt embarrassed. However, as soon as I told a few trusted friends that I felt lonely sometimes, they too opened up about their experiences and I began to feel better, realising that I wasn't alone in these feelings. Luckily for me, it's only ever been a fleeting feeling, but I have been there, I've acknowledged that feeling, spoken about it and moved on.

Having the strength to be able to show your vulnerable side is a positive and I promise you, I really promise you, that if you tell someone how lonely you are in that moment, they will be empathetic, they will want to support you.

Since the pandemic, we have become more accepting as a society, as most of us experienced

a form of isolation or loneliness during those terrible months of lockdown and hats off to any of you who got through it alone. Talking about feelings is now more common and if you still don't believe me, try Brene Brown's book, *Daring Greatly* where she describes vulnerability as 'uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure'. She dispels the cultural myth that vulnerability is weakness.

4. Get out of the house – make time for exercise, even if you don't consider yourself a '*keep fit type of person*'. Go for a walk, get some fresh air, say hello to strangers, enjoy the simple sounds and smells of what surrounds you. Try and make your exercise a routine and you will be surprised how quickly you begin to recognise others in the same routine and whilst some of us may be habitually reserved, saying '*hi*' or smiling at people, invites others to respond in kind. I don't have a dog, I just don't have the lifestyle at the moment to give a dog what it deserves, but I love dogs so on my regular walks, I make a point of saying hi to dog owners and their pets. I get vicarious pleasure from others and its very rare that I don't get a positive response. If you too covert a dog, but can't have one, try www.borrowmydoggy.com for shared canine benefits!
5. Volunteering can also help anyone stuck in a rut or with too much time on their hands. Not only does volunteering help create routines for you, whether it's a few hours weekly in the local charity shop, or a weekly meeting for an organisation, or even helping out at a local school or hospital, volunteering can also become another social avenue whereby you make friends along the way. (Refer back to point h above, shared interests breed camaraderie).

I had just moved to Windsor, set up a business and yet felt socially isolated so I joined Rotary, an international organisation based around the world with 1.2 million members and clubs in most major towns and cities. The simple premise is to use one's time, skills and collective goodwill to improve lives of others, supporting a number of local and international initiatives. Our motto is 'Service Above Self' and I can honestly say that some of my dearest friends are Rotarians and I have visited places and done things I would never have dreamt of. The combined factors of coming together to do something for others not only takes your mind off your own problems, but it also gives you a great feeling of satisfaction that others are benefiting from your time. You can find out more at www.Rotary.org or contact me for more details.

Supporting a local charity is another good way to raise spirits and tap into very personal motivations, whether it's because of a personal loss or because a friend or relative might be in need. With over 168,000 registered charities in the UK, there are lots to choose from. Some popular ones to check out include: www.Alzheimers.org.uk; www.rspca.org; www.rnid.org.uk; www.rnib.org.uk; www.Cancerresearchuk.org; www.NSPCC.org.uk; www.gosh.org; www.rnli.org. most of whom also have local branches.

6. Discovering Travel after the end of my marriage is one of the many upsides to my life. Not only does Travel fill me with joy – the planning, the getting there, the packing, the different cultures, the people I meet, the food and drinks along the way etc, but Travel gives me a sense of freedom and adventure which truly lights up my core. I'd rather sell my car and my house, than give up travel!

I'm a firm believer that Travel does broaden the mind and without wishing to sound too virtuous, it also helps remind me how lucky I am. Some of the poorest places I've discovered in India, Cambodia and China, have taught me that happiness comes from within.

If the thought of solo travel fills you with dread, start small and plan a trip locally, build up your experience and confidence. You can also check out my article 'Tools for navigating solo travel' for some top tips. I seriously urge you to dust off your passport and give it a go!

7. Try a new hobby and/or join a social group and don't be afraid to ditch them if they really aren't for you. I remember being forced to go to the Brownies on a 'try before you sign up session'. I seriously hated it. Even at that young age, I felt judged and scared and knew it wasn't for me. Luckily mum didn't force it on me, but I had at least given it a go and that's exactly what we should all do more of in real life. I'm quite a spontaneous person and if I see something I like the look of, I'll do some research and give it a go. Some of my experiences have been more positive than others:
 - a. Negative: the time I decided that the Nordic skiers gracefully gliding around the local lake would be the perfect keep fit alternative to running. I fell on my first lesson, ended up in surgery for a frozen shoulder and spent a year struggling to fasten my own bra!
 - b. Positive: the time I saw a Personal Trainer in the local park during lockdown finishing a lesson. I approached him, asked for details and signed up. Not only did I get fit over the next 24 months, but I met a lovely lady in the village whose now a great friend and walking buddy.
 - c. Negative & positive: baking banana bread for the neighbours. I'm not what you might call a natural cook and since being single, I'm a little haphazard in my food cupboard choices as cooking for one is something you either love or hate (I hate it). However, spurred on by all the community goodwill during the covid Lockdowns, I decided to join in and bake the fabled banana bread. I learnt that substituting golden syrup for eggs which I didn't have, just because the consistency looked similar and using gluten free flour because I happen to be allergic weren't good choices. It was like a brick, so I gaily threw it away and offered socially distanced G&Ts in the parking lot which were much more successful - BYOGlasses a must! The moral here being I gave it a go and turned a negative into a positive.
 - d. Positive: set up a Meetup group to get like-minded singletons together. www.Meetup.com offer literally thousands of groups across the world and are worth checking out (as are www.Eventbrite.co.uk)
 - e. Positive: Take up a new hobby or sport, in my case Golf and Yoga. With Golf you can take individual or Group lessons and there are always people who are just as nervous as you are! Yoga or pilates is more of a solo mission but by going to a venue or joining a term's programme rather than just joining a course online, you get to meet other people who by the very nature of them being there, means that you will have something in common and perhaps there is an opportunity to meet for a drink or bite to eat afterwards. Some of my friends have also joined local choirs although I'm tone deaf and can't hold a tune to save my life. Singing however, is very therapeutic, helps forge social bonds and soon breaks down any barriers.

The point I'm making here, is get out of your own space and don't be afraid to try something new. If you really don't like it, you've lost nothing, perhaps discovered something about yourself and can move on to the next thing on your list.

8. Ditch the TV! Seriously, I watch very little TV and don't have Netflix or any other of the streaming services. I find that there's too much to do to waste it on vacuous TV programmes just because they are there. I still have a collection of DVDs and am not afraid to watch them when I have time on my hands. My team genuinely laughed out loud when they heard this as they couldn't believe that I didn't have Netflix, a complete anathema to the Gen Z's amongst them. There are so many other entertainment options available:
 - a. I'm a huge proponent of Audio books (Audible is my go to) and I share a vast library with my dad, whose blind and relies on these as well as the Talking books provided by the RNIB, his lifeline to alleviating boredom.
 - b. I'm also not adverse to cranking up the radio and improving my playlist repertoires.
 - c. I also find Podcasts hugely stimulating. Not only is there a huge range to choose from, across just about every genre you can think of, but new ones emerge every week. Current favourites include:
 - i. The mid-point - Gabby Logan
 - ii. Talk Art – Russell Tovey & Robert Diament
 - iii. DOAC – The Dairy of a CEO – Steven Bartlett
 - iv. Feel Better – Live More – Dr Rangan Chatterjee
 - v. Gob Stopper & Gobsmailed – Catherine Williamson & Jill Garrett
 - vi. Conversations of Inspiration – Holly Tucker
 - vii. Beautiful Misfits – Mary Portas
 - viii. Style DNA – Amanda Wakeley
 - ix. Life's a Beach – Alan Carr
 - x. Wellness with Ella – Ella Mills

What I particularly love about these last 3 options is that I can use them on my phone and take them with me wherever I go, whether that's around the house, on my walks, in the gym or in the car. It's like having someone with me so I never get lonely!

9. Look after yourself physically and mentally – get up every day, make the bed, make an effort to face the world (general grooming and having at least one thing to do every day), dress up occasionally, get your hair done professionally now and then, contact friends and wear a smile. Smiles are the greatest accessories ever which I think we sadly lost somewhat during the lockdown years. For many of us who got used to working from home, the jogger bottom phase really didn't do anything for our self esteem and I find that if I feel 'well put together' each morning, I genuinely feel more confident and ready to face the world, wherever I happen to be going.

I'm also quite addicted to continuous learning. Google and Alexa are amongst my favourite tools in my toolbox of life. If I come across a word I don't know the meaning of, I ask Alexa or I Google it. I spend my leisure time wisely with a balance of fun, learning and listening. I want to keep as physically and mentally sharp as I can for as long as I can. I want to remain interesting.

10. Develop resilience, avoid toxicity and accept your imperfections. Being mid-lifers, our skills, experience, and expertise(s) are more important than what we look like. Our wrinkles and blemishes are medals of a life well lived, as are the proverbial war wounds we've encountered on our journey thus far.

I have also honed my resilience by walking away from toxic situations; I choose my battles and refuse to engage with pointless situations or arguments, including those on any form of social media or reality TV. I draw strength from acknowledging other people's opinions and sometimes just walking away. The test of whether I choose to engage or not, is whether by engaging, I can make a difference. Providing I stand by my truth, my morals and my principles, I feel calm and balanced. I developed a set of values when I launched Jetty Socials which are really just an amalgamation of what I hold true to my own heart and I try to live by them every day. I find if I stray from them, I begin to feel less centred.

Try writing down your values and with them, your own personal mission statement for this next phase of your life and when you're happy with them (it might take a few drafts) pin them up and try to live by them every day.

I hope you've enjoyed my Tools to beat Loneliness, I'd love to know how you get on and what top tips you have too. You can email me at Julia@jettysocials.com