

# Adult and Elderly Experiences of Solitude, the Significance of Autonomy

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## Abstract

Solitude is often characterized as "being alone or isolated from civilization." Because humans are social organisms with a strong need for interpersonal bonds, solitude can be difficult. As a result, loneliness (Long & Averill, 2003), poor positive affect, or unpleasant thoughts have been commonly related with solitude. On the contrary, it has been acknowledged that alone can provide benefits such as freedom of choice, relief from social stresses, and the possibility for spirituality or creativity. Autonomy is one of the key qualities related with a favorable feeling of isolation. When solitary is self-determined, resulting from self-motivation, it is positively experienced; non-self-determined solitude that arises without one's control and desire is adversely experienced.

**Keywords:** Solitude

## Introduction

As people get older and their social networks dwindle, they become more isolated in their daily lives. Furthermore, older persons want isolation more than younger adults, implying that solitary in later age can be chosen. Indeed, solitude has been associated to better affective and biological results in older persons when compared to middle-aged and younger adults. These distinctions have been examined in terms of older persons' improved emotion-regulation methods. Not only do older persons have greater emotional stability and motivation to sustain positive affect in daily life, but they also have stronger emotion-regulation methods than younger adults. As a result, older people may experience alone less negatively because they are better able to deal with negative emotions that may develop from it.

Alternatively, the more favorable feeling of loneliness in old age may reflect variations in life conditions between young and old. Previous research indicated that as people age, they gain autonomy, which is defined as a sense of self-determination and freedom from external constraints in one's life. They become free of external obligations and limitations, namely employment and family responsibilities, and are less governed by age-related standards and expectations. Both provide people more freedom to pursue their desired goals. As a result, research has shown that age is favorably connected with autonomy in daily chores as well as personal aspirations.

High autonomy fosters the sensation of having the ability and incentive to conduct in accordance with one's goals, preferences, values, and interests. To put it another way, behaviour regulation is more

harmonious and less likely to cause conflict. This is equally true for daily periods of alone. Higher autonomy in isolation times encourages behaviour based on one's goals, preferences, values, and interests, making the experience of solitude more positive. Taking everything into account, older persons' moments of isolation may be more self-determined, and hence more likely to encourage the benefits of being alone. In other words, the degree of autonomy in choosing to remain alone may explain age disparities in the sensation of loneliness.

We propose that older persons report greater autonomy in moments of isolation and perceive moments of solitary more favorably than younger adults based on these theoretical reasons and empirical evidence. Furthermore, we contend that autonomy is related to a more positive experience of isolation moments. Finally, we investigate if autonomy is age-related to the sensation of isolation moments. In other words, we investigate whether it is equally meaningful for younger and older persons' experiences of self-determination in their moments of alone. Although people aim for maximum control throughout their lives, their ability to actively mould their development in accordance with their objectives, preferences, beliefs, and interests diminishes as they age (e.g., due to health constraints).

According to developmental theories of self-regulation, people modify their control techniques accordingly. They may, for example, downgrade their objectives, preferences, values, and interests in relation to available resources, and they may employ emotion-regulation tactics or downward social comparisons to preserve resources and maintain high levels of emotional well-being and self-esteem. Adopting solitude, it is probable that autonomy in the selection of alone times has a significantly less important part in the experience of older adults since older persons can cope better with conditions of restricted control. In the current study, we put this possibility to the test.

People encounter alone for a variety of reasons throughout their lives. We studied the role of autonomy as a predictor of the experience of loneliness in the current study. We claimed that older persons, as opposed to younger ones, have a more pleasant experience of isolation because their daily lives are more under their own control and their moments of solitary are more often self-determined. Although our findings show that both age and autonomy are related with a more positive feeling of solitude, they do not support our hypothesis that autonomy is the mechanism underlying age differences in solitude experience. In other words, older persons' moments of solitary were not more self-determined than young adults' moments of solitude.

However, solitude resulting from a situational (as well as average) personal desire or decision is correlated with a more positive experience. In the current study, this conclusion was repeated across three distinct trials and is consistent with past research and rationale. Future study should directly examine the hypothesis that high autonomy leads to a more positive experience of solitary since persons in high-autonomy isolation tend to conduct more forcefully in accordance with their goals, interests, values, and preferences.

Interestingly, our research shows that the generally good link between autonomy and the sensation of isolation is weakened in later adulthood, notably for subjective well-being and situation valence (solitude). This observation lends support to developmental theories of self-regulation. In particular, the diminished role of autonomy for the positive experience of solitude in older adulthood could be explained by compensatory mechanisms (e.g., downgrading own aspirations or increased use of emotion-regulation strategies) in older adults, which could be explained by older adults' limited capacity to exert control (e.g., based on age-related deterioration in health). Indeed, older adults who struggle with daily duties may choose seclusion in order to regain autonomy and control.