



BEING ON MY OWN

The Dream

From the time that we are very young and hear fairy tales of princes and princesses marrying and living 'happily ever after', we are encouraged to buy into the dream that everyone will, eventually, enter into a long term, committed, exclusive and happy relationship – preferably marriage and preferably with children. The pressure builds through our teenage years as peers demand of each other 'are you going out with anyone yet, have you slept with anyone yet?' to the ever present relative or well-meaning friend asking of us in late 20's, early 30's 'when are you going to settle down?' Assumptions in advertising and political rhetoric all reinforce this 'dream'. It is easy to start to feel that if our own lives are not following this dream, then we have somehow individually got it wrong. We may feel, in some way, a lesser person for it.

The Reality

The reality is that for a significant number of us this dream either never materialises or changes in life mean we find ourselves alone and this can leave us with feelings that can include failure, loss, loneliness, difference and rejection. If our life continues with no meaningful partnership within it, these feelings can be compounded by a sense of having 'missed the boat' – a bit like being alone on the edge of life looking in, whilst everyone else is enjoying the part. At their worst, over time, these feelings can escalate into hopelessness and despair.

It can be hard to manage such feelings in everyday life as well as hold ourselves open to the opportunity of potential relationships developing (if that is what we want), whilst also finding life enjoyable and fulfilling on our own.

The aim of this leaflet is to help those who are struggling to 'be on their own' with any sense of meaning, start to explore more fully their own personal feelings, values and needs and to think about ways in which life could become more rewarding and fulfilling.

What does being without a partner mean to me?

It can be easy to assume that each of us feels the same way about being alone, and certainly there are common themes – as outlined below:

Social isolation

being without a partner may also go hand in hand with having few, if any, close friends and a poor, if any, social life.

Missing out

feeling that life could be more exciting, more dynamic, more meaningful if only it were shared with somebody else.

Changing needs

a realisation that our desires and needs in life have changed over time: that what has satisfied us for the last 2 or 3, 15 or 20 years now no longer seems so fulfilling. In our working life we may have accomplished much of what we hoped to achieve, and now notice the growing desire for love or companionship.

Soul searching

making sense of our very being and place in the world often

becomes more important to us as we get older. We are more acutely aware of the state of the world around us and may be less optimistic for our own future. When meaningful relationships seem elusive and if our questioning takes place alone, then trying to make sense of 'what's it all about' can become an exercise in self-criticism rather than spiritual reflection.

For each of us, being on our own will hold unique and personal meaning related to our own life stories and experiences and these can change with time and circumstances.

Questions

To ask yourself the following questions and to answer them within the context of your own family, social, professional and experiential background could help you start to unravel, identify and understand the individual feelings that this state holds for you, as well as their level of intensity.

Do I really have to be in a partnership to be happy?

For some, the experience of being on our own is a satisfying, fulfilling place to be – bringing freedom, independence and the ability to make choices and decisions which aren't hindered by the needs of others. Being without a partner does not have to mean being without a social life, or other meaningful relationships, happiness and fulfilment. Being on your own, does not have to be a synonym for being lonely.

It is therefore worth checking with yourself why for you, personally, it is such an unhappy place to be.

What do you imagine would be put right by being in a partnership:

- Loneliness?

- the desire for children?
- conforming to the assumed norm?
- to fill a gap somewhere else in life?
- to heal past wounds?
- to fulfil family expectations?

The answers to this question may give you a sense of where the drive to be in a partnership is rooted, and give you some guidance as to the courses of action you could take to get your needs met. It might not be necessary to find a partnership.

What about my sexuality?

Many of us have a clear sense of our sexual drive from an early age. Others feel no discernible sexual impulses. For some who are homosexual or bisexual begin attracted to the same gender can pose difficulties in families, friendships and society. Any worries around sexual drive can lead to suppression or denial of ways of being, and make it impossible for a satisfying and fulfilling partnership and sexual relationship to be entered into.

Being honest with yourself about your own sexuality without the hindrance of real or perceived societal, social and family prejudices is therefore a courageous but necessary step to take, as you seek to find satisfying and sustainable relationships.

Are your beliefs getting in the way?

We each have our own ideas and dreams about how long term relationships will start: luck, fate, love-at-first sight, the development of a friendship, dating agencies, a work relationship that becomes romantic. Whatever your belief is in how relationships start, or should start, holding it is fine as long as you

can also allow yourself the flexibility to discover that there may be other ways too. A rigidly held assumption and expectation can sabotage and severely limit your willingness and ability to be open and receptive to different experiences which could in turn themselves add fulfilment and meaning to life.

For example, some people believe that joining a dating agency is the epitome of desperateness whilst others believe it to be a brilliant way of meeting people. How have you come to your own beliefs? Are they helping or hindering your quest for a more meaningful way of living?

Why might I be on my own?

There are many different reasons why some people find it harder to make and sustain meaningful relationships and/or partnerships rather than others. Below are a few pointers to help you explore why this might be the case for yourself.

How do I feel about myself ... emotionally?

Our past experiences of how others have related to us and our sense of being loved or not, will impact significantly on how we relate to the outside world and what we think about ourselves. For instance, if we have grown up in an environment that has been critical (however well meaning that criticism was meant) or suffocating or bullying, our self-esteem and sense of our own self worth will have taken quite a battering. Our sense of not having anything of worth to offer others or life may be considerable and the longer that we feel alone and lonely the more this feeling is confirmed – and the more pointless and futile it then seems to try and make any changes or to feel any differently.

How do I feel about myself ... physically?

Our sense of our own physical presence on earth plays a crucial part in how we feel about ourselves and how we present to the world around us. No matter what shape, size or stature we are, if we are not comfortable in our own skin, we won't be comfortable near the skins of others. From paying little attention to how we look or dress through to obsessive dieting or fitness regimes, how we respond to ourselves physically correlates with how we feel about ourselves emotionally – and it is more likely than not that this will be conveyed to others. It is not always an easy path to gain self-respect and self-worth but it is a necessary path to travel in order to be fulfilled, whether in partnership or alone, and to find a sense of internal integration. One school of thought is that 'if you can't love yourself then how can you love others?' Or to put it another way if we don't want ourselves, why would others want us?

But note – this is not to spur us into engaging in yet harsher measures to try to attain our physical idea; rather, it is to learn to accept and like ourselves the way we are.

Do I feel awkward socially?

The thought of making 'chit-chat', polite conversation, or being in social situations without a 'role' to hide behind can be extremely daunting for some – leading to a withdrawn, isolated and lonely way of living.

If this is how it is for you, then perhaps it is time now to start to consider that it doesn't have to be this way – that change is possible? The thought of solutions may not be easy, but living a lonely life isn't either.

Is work all I have?

List all the activities you do that provide you with an opportunity to meet people and socialise and add to the sense of wellbeing in your life. If you are hard pushed to think of many, then perhaps you need to ask yourself why?

What's my personal experience and history of friendships and relationships?

Everyone will be affected by upbringing and past experiences. Consider your own experiences. Was your family social and outgoing, did you chatter around the table at meal times, were you comfortable mixing with the opposite sex? What was your past experience of relationships and friendships? Were you allowed them? Were they encouraged? Were certain relationships encouraged whilst others were frowned upon? Perhaps the answers to some of these questions may help you make sense of where your struggles are now in making and/or maintaining friendships and relationships?

How can I help myself?

By reading this leaflet and answering the questions, you will hopefully be in the process of gaining a clearer understanding of what being on your own means to you, and possible reasons for it. You may also have gained insight into what action you need to take to try and change the status quo. Perhaps your external world needs to change – more social activities, less time on your own for instance, in which case practical steps need to be considered? Or you may realise that internal change needs to occur, breaking instilled patterns, daring to take some risks, in which case counselling could be useful? Or indeed it may be that both internal and external change feels necessary.

Have you thought of ... ?

The Staff Counselling Service

- <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk>
- Tel: 01223 762160
- Email: staffcouns@admin.cam.ac.uk

Personal and Professional Development

- www.ppd.admin.cam.ac.uk

The University of Cambridge Sports Centre

- www.sport.cam.ac.uk

Local information websites –groups, societies, activities etc

- Cambridge Online City: www.colc.co.uk
- www.cambridgedirectory.co.uk

And finally ...

The aim of this leaflet is to encourage self-reflection and to foster the hope that there are ways forward out of the greyness that you had not previously considered and encouragement to start the process.

It may be a truism, but the longest journey starts with the smallest step. You have already done something different simply by reading this leaflet. You have already started your journey.

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