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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Who feels good in solitude? A qualitative analysis of the personality and mindset factors relating to well-being when alone

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## Abstract

What leads to peaceful and enjoyable solitude? Little is known about which personality and mindset qualities benefit individuals during time spent alone. The current study was designed to build a foundation for future quantitative and qualitative research making a priori predictions about well-being (e.g., relaxation) or ill-being (e.g., loneliness) when individuals are in solitude. Semi-structured interviews of  $n = 60$  participants, aged 19–80, were analyzed into themes. Exposure to the benefits of solitude early in life and personality characteristics that cross life's domains (capacity for introspection and self-reflection and optimism) were associated with enjoying solitude. Mindsets recognizing that solitude benefits self-connection, as well as in situ factors of creativity and curiosity, appeared to play important roles. In a final theme, self-compassion, a present focus and perspective taking helped to alleviate discomfort during difficult moments of solitude. These findings deepen our understanding of which qualities individuals bring forward to enhance their moments of solitude.

## KEYWORDS

adaptability, curiosity, personality, solitude, well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Studies of solitude, defined as time spent alone either without others physically present (Larson, 1990) or without social interaction (Lay et al., 2019; Long et al., 2003), have shown remarkably divergent impacts on well-being. On one hand, researchers and healthcare practitioners alike have expressed concern that prolonged time spent in solitude gives rise to feelings of loneliness and depressive symptoms (James, 1982; Killeen, 1998; MentalHealth.org, 2020; Rokach, 1990) and may lead to detrimental health outcomes in the long term (Shankar et al., 2011; Steptoe et al., 2013). On the other hand, the more benign outcome associated with time spent alone is boredom (Leung, 2015), which explains why many people, and particularly younger adults, prefer to use electronic devices to pass time (Wang et al., 2013). Despite findings showing that solitude is undesirable for people across age

groups (Larson, 1990), recent research has identified a positive side of solitude, which yields well-being benefits (Coplan et al., 2019; Lay et al., 2019; Long & Averill, 2003; Long et al., 2003). Understanding that both positive and negative experiences can occur in solitude (Averill & Sundararajan, 2014) allows researchers to broaden the scope of research for the purpose of identifying the conditions in which individuals are resilient, and even flourish, in that state. The current study was designed to describe the characteristics within individuals that those individuals see as contributing positively to their own solitude experience, and that they assume to yield well-being benefits when they spent time alone. We explored these views through a framework that considered their personality-level characteristics (stable tendencies that cross life's domains) and solitude-specific characteristics (those that participants felt were specific about their relationship to solitude or that emerged during their moments of solitude).

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## 1.1 | Well-being in solitude

Despite certain instances of solitude being associated with the negative mental health outcomes of loneliness and boredom (James, 1982; Killeen, 1998; Rokach, 1990), time spent alone under supportive circumstances (e.g., positive motivational states) can help to regulate high-arousal negative emotions such as anxiety (Nguyen et al., 2018) and people often associate positive solitude with self-discovery and spiritual growth (Long & Averill, 2003; Naor & Mayseless, 2020; Storr, 2005). One study analyzing 19 million Tweets found that those including the word 'solitude' also described positive feelings such as 'joy' when compared to those that used the term 'alone' (Hipson et al., 2021). Alongside quantitative work, qualitative interview findings have been helpful for understanding the benefits gained by being alone (e.g., for relaxation and creativity; Long, 2000) and for defining positive solitude (Ost Mor et al., 2020). Though researchers are starting to understand that solitude holds benefits for the individual who is prepared to spend time alone and who is capable of doing this (Coplan et al., 2021), there is scant understanding of who may benefit from solitude and with what mindsets they may do so.

There are several notable exceptions to otherwise scarce data regarding the factors related to well-being in solitude; that is, factors that precede time alone and also shape the extent to which it is enjoyed and seen to be beneficial. For example, a significant portion of the existing literature identifies strong and consistent links between choosing and valuing solitude and subsequent positive outcomes in solitude. This work suggests that an important distinction exists between chosen or voluntary and unchosen or involuntary solitude (Galanaki, 2004). Choosing how to spend time alone (Nguyen et al., 2018), spending time alone by choice instead of by force (Lay et al., 2020; Tse et al., 2022), or possessing a healthy motivation towards solitude (Nguyen et al., 2018; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019) are all associated with positive well-being outcomes. Taking this literature together, solitude is a malleable state, one that can be chosen or forced on individuals and that can therefore be experienced as positive or negative.

Despite having many merits, these top-down approaches require researchers to select predictive candidates before model-testing to develop a priori empirical models. For this reason, researchers often rely—by necessity—on generic predictors of well-being derived from studies that do not relate to solitude (Nguyen et al., 2021). As a result, the existing body of work may neglect potential predictors of well-being specific to the solitude state. There is value in identifying the breadth of factors (i.e., characteristics of individuals across time or in the moment) related to well-being in solitude and exploring the salience to participants of those factors that have been tested thus far in the empirical literature. Qualitative research can be useful for providing this perspective because the data-gathering process is receptive to the spontaneous insights of participants, including those that researchers may not have otherwise conceptualized (Patton, 2005). In other words, qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, can identify factors that participants themselves feel are important rather than being limited by researchers' a priori conceptions.

## 1.2 | Modelling factors related to well-being in solitude

There are multiple layers of factors shaping the relationship with solitude. Of these, stable personality differences that predict how individuals respond to solitary experiences have received some attention in siloed quantitative studies. One study has associated inner-directed solitude, a form of positive solitude that involves spending time alone for self-discovery, inner peace and freedom, with greater self-esteem, less anxious attachment and more emotional creativity, suggesting a link between stable dispositions and solitude benefits (Long et al., 2003). Another study has linked negative, lonely experiences of solitude with big-five traits (namely, higher neuroticism and lower extraversion; e.g., Long et al., 2003). Further studies have related preference for solitude to negative traits such as general anxiety, social anxiety and loneliness (Burger, 1995) and negative previous experiences such as ostracism (Ren & Evans, 2021; Ren et al., 2016). As such, although there appears to be some evidence that personality contributes to a maladaptive preference for solitude over social connection, the findings concerning the role of personality on positive solitude suggest the relationship is more nuanced. For example, it is sensible to assume that introverts would prefer to be alone and extraverts would seek out social interactions (e.g., Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998), yet evidence suggests that this preference does not result in experiencing pleasure in solitude (Leary et al., 2003; Srivastava et al., 2008). Further, nascent research shows the important role of self-determined orientation (Weinstein et al., 2012), defined as an individual tendency toward self-reflection and congruence, in predicting whether or not solitude is enjoyed (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Beyond personality factors that cross life's domains (Hogan, 1991), there is more consistent evidence suggesting that the specific motivation or reasons behind why someone chooses to be alone are significant predictors of how they feel in that state. The literature draws from the motivational perspective of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) to argue that some people can be motivated to engage with an experience out of enjoyment or recognition of the importance of its benefits (self-determined motivation), whereas others are coerced or forced to behave through external demands (non-self-determined motivation; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). Motivation for solitude has been assessed as a general approach towards solitude (Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019) and at state levels, wherein motivation varies within individuals and with respect to specific moments of being alone (Chua & Koestner, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2018). Convergent evidence also suggests that motivation to engage with solitude for enjoyable or self-meaningful activities (e.g., creativity, self-reflection, inner peace; the same activities identified by Long et al. (2003) to be positive aspects of solitude) contributes to greater life satisfaction (Chua & Koestner, 2008), relaxation (Study 4; Nguyen et al., 2018), and less loneliness (Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

Finally, there is reason to believe that alongside cross-domain personality factors, individuals' mindset related to solitude would offer a distinct contribution to well-being. Mindsets are likely shaped by

personality processes but they are also formed by contextual factors (including motivation) and represent thinking that can be more domain- and time-specific as opposed to the stable and cross-domain qualities of personality factors (Dougherty & Guillette, 2018). Mindsets are useful to study in their own right because they are situationally responsive and context-dependent patterns of behaviour that can inform interventions to shape well-being in solitude. One study by Rodriguez et al. (2020) found that describing to participants the benefits of solitude before giving them 15 min alone mitigated a decline in positive mood during that time. However, there is much more to learn about the role of mindsets in well-being in solitude.

### 1.3 | Current study

A growing literature speaks to factors that determine well-being in solitude (e.g., whether it is chosen or forced), but there is limited understanding of what contributes to positive solitude, especially in terms of personality and mindsets that might shape the approach people take to their solitude experiences. The current research was designed to explore which psychological factors drive well-being in solitude, understood in terms of spontaneously described well-being and an absence of ill-being, both defined broadly in terms of self-described positive and negative affect and emotions indicated in the literature (such as peacefulness, or loneliness; de Jong-Gierveld et al., 2006; Storr, 2005). We held some assumptions at the outset based on the current literature. First, theorists have argued that experiences across development shape the relationship with solitude (Rogers, 1980; Winnicott, 1958), but there is little data to evaluate these claims or understand the nature of the influences across development. Further, although some personality predictors have been identified (e.g., introversion; preference for solitude; Coplan et al., 2021), there is little to no exploration of dispositional and individual-level predictors beyond these. Above, we reviewed what is known about what predicts experiences in solitude. We therefore anticipated that these processes would play a role. We also anticipated that motivation for solitude would predict well-being in solitude, particularly because the most robust evidence to date has linked choosing and valuing solitude with positive psychological and developmental well-being (Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

We set out to explore an overarching research question: What factors within themselves do individuals identify as contributing to their positive versus negative experiences of solitude? While recognizing existing predictors, we strove to keep an open mind and consider all evidence of well-being factors, including those that had not been in particular focus in past research. As pre-registered at the outset of the research, the ideal composition of the sample was heterogeneous. We sought to recruit a diverse sample across adult ages, cultural backgrounds and life circumstances and actively recruited those individuals who could speak meaningfully or substantively about their experiences in solitude.

Analyses were conducted to align the work with the existing literature but also to inform future models not bound by existing

assumptions already made in the literature. The first goal was aimed at extending the reach of existing knowledge to identify new well-being factors and the prominence of certain predictive factors over others. The second goal was aimed at benefiting from existing knowledge and informing it through conceptual replication with data derived with a different approach, namely through qualitative analysis rather than the more common quantitative approach that has been used in the literature.

## 2 | METHOD

**Participants.** Data were collected through 60 in-depth interviews. Participants were 34 women and 26 men aged 19–80 years ( $M = 41.84$  years). Thirty-seven (62%) resided in the United Kingdom, 9 (15%) in the United States and 11 (18%) in other countries. They reported 20 different countries-of-origin (23 (38%) from the United Kingdom, 12 (20%) from the United States and 23 (38%) from other countries). With regard to the ethnicity of participants, 36 (60%) were White, six (10%) were Middle Eastern or Persian, 12 (20%) were East Asian and four (6.6%) were Black or Hispanic. As we learned during interviews, they included students, unemployed people, full-time workers and retirees, healthy individuals and others living with long-term illnesses, although we did not systematically collect information on these characteristics.

**Sampling strategy.** The study was introduced to participants as 'experiences of solitude' and participants were aware at the outset that our goal was to learn about their views on time spent alone. Participants were recruited through outreach within our local communities (e.g., through listservs and snowballing;  $n = 28$ ) and Prolific Academic (a research participant platform;  $n = 32$ ). Our first goal was to incorporate perspectives of different individuals with different life experiences and thus, potentially, myriad relationships with solitude. Our second goal—to recruit a subset of participants who could elaborate on their experience of solitude—was important because surface descriptions of solitude could not thoroughly tackle abstract constructs such as personality or mindset. Solitude is an inherently inward-focused event and also one that people may take for granted as commonplace. We therefore sought insightful views about what made it a positive experience rather than a negative one (i.e., where well-being comes from). When recruiting through Prolific, we selected a subset from an initial pool ( $n = 379$ ) of interested applicants who demonstrated some ability to elaborate on their solitude in brief written narratives of what solitude means to them. To do so, we asked all in our pool to elaborate on their solitude experiences in 1 min and a co-first author selected those individuals who (1) Reflected on their internal experience (e.g., feelings, thoughts), rather than just behavior (e.g., watching TV); (2) Used full sentences to describe their experiences and (3) Demonstrated some level of inquiry about their experience (e.g., I felt X because of Y; I would have liked to have been...).

**Procedure.** Participants who volunteered to take part followed an online link to read consent materials and provide demographic information. Interviews were conducted between April 2020 and July 2021 by a separate co-first author. All interviews were conducted

in English. Interviews then took place online through Zoom, Teams or by phone and lasted approximately 45–60 min. Interviews were semi-structured and the interviewer followed a predetermined set of questions (presented on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at 10.17605/OSF.IO/9NF47). They involved questions that addressed: (1) The role of solitude in participants' lives, (2) What their daily time alone looks like, (3) Participants' positive and negative experiences in solitude, (4) Participants' thoughts on what makes solitude good for them and (5) Participants' thoughts on if and why they are resilient in solitude. On the project page, the interview approach was also pre-registered before conducting interviews. We amended it in a subsequent registration when augmenting the questionnaire after we reached saturation on a number of themes (at 60% of interviews). We increased the richness of the interview procedure by asking additional questions that built on our predetermined set of questions. Audio recordings were transcribed by an independent firm and transcriptions de-identified (names were redacted from transcripts).

## 2.1 | Data analysis

**Overall analytic approach.** Data were processed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). The benefit of thematic analysis is its combined rigor and flexibility, which allows for a detailed yet systematic accounting of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were analyzed with factors associated with well-being in mind. Specifically, we were interested in characteristics that participants felt made them enjoy and benefit from their time in solitude.

To align this work with nascent literature that speaks to the question of well-being in solitude, we opted to take a realist stance to materials (Haig, 2018). Initially, we were driven by a 'bottom-up' approach; that is, data were first processed without attempting to fit them into pre-existing categories (Patton, 2005). We did not exclude potential themes that did not fit existing literature and did not force themes where they were not appropriate to the data.

We identified themes following a multi-stage process that ultimately formed the results we present in this paper. First, while conducting interviews we familiarized ourselves with the data and began the process of generating 24 initial codes as we observed responses that could inform our research questions. These primitive lists of codes were given equal representation and kept separate, with no overarching categories clustering them. Initial themes were identified independently by the lead analyst (HH), who then discussed them with a co-analyst (NW) who independently coded a subset of interviews.

Several explicit decisions were made when determining the final set of themes that emerged from initial codes, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, thematic analysis allows flexibility in how frequent a theme must be to receive an acknowledgement. For the current study purposes, each of the first two authors identified themes that were prominent in the initial 10 interviews independently, either because they recurred in the majority of content or because they were key to a small number of participants' understanding of the role of soli-

tude in their lives and their well-being in it. We established, again independently, a set of themes to organize those data and had a conversation comparing our analyses and discussing the merits of including each theme. After each set of 10 interviews, we repeated the process, streamlining terminology among similar themes and discussing the overall relevance of each theme. After analyzing all interviews, we determined themes were important when they had been prominent for a few or more of our participants or touched upon in the majority of interviews.

After these discussions and the creation of initial lists outlining potential theme clustering, we generated semantic themes—themes that do not directly correspond to what participants said but rather impose abstract constructs that attempt to represent the meaning of the data (Guest & McLellan, 2003). We selected those that helped us to identify factors related to well-being. We refined themes through multiple rounds of revisions aimed at achieving conceptual clarity and extracting meaning and placed them into overarching theme categories, with particular sensitivity to internal homogeneity (quotations within a theme were similar in meaning to one another) and external heterogeneity (the themes themselves were distinct from one another), to the extent to which interview excerpts both reflected a particular theme coherently and were conceptually distinct from one another (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2005).

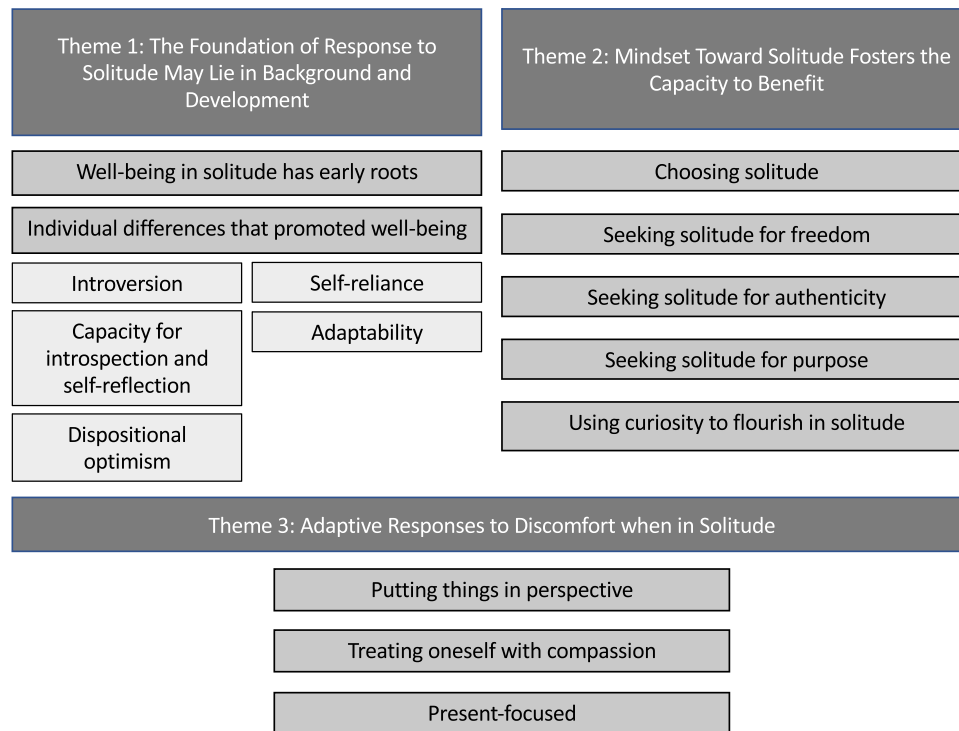
During these final set of refinements, further refinements of the theme were made in accordance with the existing literature. For example, we did this through recognizing where themes or aspects of themes aligned with constructs that have already been studied in the solitude literature (such as in the case of choosing solitude; Ost Mor, 2020; Tuckett, 2005) and beyond in individual difference research. Our aim in doing this was to build new knowledge in this study, while also recognizing concepts and research findings already in the literature.

**Rigor.** Multiple steps were taken to increase the rigor of the research, including considerations of data saturation and bias.

**Data saturation.** Data saturation is achieved when themes in the data become repetitious and no new knowledge is gained from additional interviews (Morse, 2015). We aimed to recruit strategically for diversity and ask complementary interview questions that attempted to elicit views on the topic from different angles before being satisfied that we had reached data saturation.

**Researcher reflexivity.** We also considered reflexivity—that is, how the perspective and background of the lead interviewer and analyst (HH) would bias or colour how the data are interpreted (Schoenberg et al., 2007). The lead analyst kept a diary of interviews, themes, and her assumptions and reactions (10.17605/OSF.IO/9NF47) in line with best practices (Ezzy, 2002). The supporting analyst (NW) conducted a separate analysis of approximately 50% of interviews to inform her conversations with the lead analyst; NW also kept a diary during this independent analysis and recognized her preconceptions from the psychology and solitude empirical literature. During the interview process, we were sensitive to preconceived notions about the type of person who flourishes in solitude and the classifications, or themes, that might organize those ideas.





**FIGURE 1** Summary of themes identified.

In a further attempt to mitigate bias, two strategies for validation were taken. First, the two lead authors engaged in frequent discussions reviewing the meaning of emerging codes. Second, 60% of the extracts were independently validated by an independent group of three researchers naïve to the views of either initial researcher. Those supplementary researchers reviewed each of the participant phrases that had been identified as representing a particular code. They then rated the appropriateness of each to the category into which it was assigned, distinguishing whether it was 0 (*not appropriate*) or 1 (*appropriate scale*). Naïve raters largely agreed that the data were appropriate for the code across two perspectives ( $>x = .82$  within each theme), giving greater confidence that codes represented the data.

### 3 | RESULTS

**Overview of findings.** Recurring, overlapping ideas formed the basis of the themes we extracted, with a focus on those that spoke to factors related to well-being in solitude. Specifically, we looked for places where participants attributed their current enjoyment of solitude to qualities within themselves that prepare them for benefits when they are alone. Those dominant concepts, summarized in Figure 1, centred around what participants 'bring to the table' in terms of several overarching themes that were identified during the analysis process: developmental factors and personality, mindset towards solitude, approach to experiences within solitude and tools and strategies for coping when solitude is difficult. Three themes were identified: Theme One—Background or developmental foundations that often unfolded

over years or decades and reflected broad dispositions across domains (including solitude); Theme Two—Mindsets that relate directly to solitude; and Theme Three—Adaptive responses to discomfort after solitude has begun, which included factors that allowed individuals to work through difficult experiences in solitude. We further divided these themes into sub-themes, described below.

#### 3.1 | Theme One: The foundation of response to solitude may lie in background and development

Participants identified early childhood experiences that gave rise to certain capabilities or tendencies to respond in certain ways when alone. While the responses were not universal, some strikingly similar attributes were identified. See Table 1 for quotations reflecting this and other themes.

**1.1 Well-being in solitude has early roots.** Though we did not define this as a well-being factor, per se, these descriptions suggested a disposition towards enjoying solitude that is deep-seated and persistent, to the extent that solitude feels like a natural and positive part of some people's lives. Participants also talked about having had what we began to refer to as an 'early adaptation' to solitude. Many interviewees learned how to be alone in childhood when adults in their lives modeled its importance, or by being expected to 'entertain' themselves as children. They described developing a familiarity with solitude through this exposure, which was naturally balanced against family and other social interactions and which allowed them to identify opportunities for activities and experiences that are best undertaken alone.

**TABLE 1** Example participant quotes informing each of the four themes identified.

Theme or Subtheme	Participant Quotes
<b>Theme 1</b>	<b>The Foundation of Response to Solitude May Lie in Background and Development</b>
<b>Well-being in solitude has early roots</b>	<p>It's become clear to me that it's something that I need. That it's not something that's wrong with me. That it's just the way I've been built, the way I always have been if I think back to myself playing as a child. This has always been a big part of my life and that need is not going to go away. (P15)</p> <p>I'm constantly grateful to [my family] that I've had this, these examples because, you know, you kind of learn what to do. I think it was a learned thing for me. (P14)</p> <p>So, when I was growing up I had to keep myself entertained, things like that. So, that's probably why I find my free time so enjoyable. (P41)</p>
<b>Individual differences</b>	
<b>Introversiion</b>	<p>I'm a person that doesn't really like being at the centre of attention, because perhaps maybe I'm slightly more introverted or innately, I don't really like being the centre of attention. (P50)</p> <p>I think the really strong thing is that I'm more introvert than extrovert. (P39)</p> <p>I think at my core I'm an introvert, so I need that solitude and alone time to decompress and, I guess, re-energize. (P48)</p> <p>I just have always, I think have recharged, I'm an introvert in that way, that I recharge on my own. (P17)</p>
<b>Self-reliance</b>	<p>I think, to me, it's just all about independence...So solitude, to me, is just another way of, I guess, having a healthy mindset about yourself. (P52)</p> <p>I've always been a pretty independent person, so I think perhaps some of us have got more inner strength than others. (P36)</p> <p>I've had to make decisions on my own, even from a very young age. And so that's where the resilience part comes in. (P10)</p> <p>I have experiences in my life where I had to be by myself and love me by myself, and realizing that what other people think about me doesn't matter, what matters is what I think about myself. (P42)</p> <p>When you come here [to solitude] it's just you. You have to do it, it's up to you, and that kind of helps growth I feel. (P37)</p> <p>I think you get that confidence in those solitary moments or, you know, when you learn to trust yourself because there's just nobody else around and it's like alright this is what I'm going to do, there's nobody else around to say what I should or shouldn't do so here I am and this is how I'm going to do it. (P14)</p>
<b>Capacity for introspection and self-reflection</b>	<p>And I think self-reflectiveness, if you asked me, I think probably being reflective makes it easier to not feel alone, even when you're the only person in the room. (P06)</p> <p>What makes good solitude for me is getting to know myself and it has been a process, and it's going to be a process until I die I think. (P42)</p> <p>My ability to relate to myself, talk with myself, to organize myself, regulate myself, my feelings, my routines, my attention. It's critical. (P21)</p> <p>And sometimes it's good things, sometimes I'm churning over bad things, be that bad things that have personally happened to me in the past or the bad things that are happening to the world at the moment and I churn everything over and it gives me, that time alone gives me... that little space that I need to be me. (P30)</p> <p>Like when I'm alone, it gives me a time and space, an undisturbed phase, to have a conversation with myself, and gives me space to recognize what I'm feeling, perhaps throughout the day, I recognize—like, I'll be more aware of why I feel what I feel, how I feel, and just giving me a space of reflection, and looking inward. (P49)</p>
<b>Dispositional optimism</b>	<p>[I] bounce out of bed in the morning and, you know, greet the day, whether it's pouring with rain or whatever, with kind of energy and enthusiasm...I guess I'm fortunate, blessed with a disposition and a chemistry that most of the time seems to be quite resilient. (P05)</p> <p>But I'm generally a very positive sort of person, so mostly I get positive feelings from solitude... I'm always optimistic. I always have been. I'm always, you know, the glass is always half-full. It's never half-empty. (P26)</p> <p>I generally find myself quite an optimistic person. I'm always sort of the glass half-full, I think generally I think the best of people and I allow them to show me otherwise. So I think maybe that speaks to why I'm a bit more comfortable doing those times alone, thinking about it. Because maybe I, even in spite of whatever I intend to do with the emotions, maybe I'm also still thinking, 'I can do it, whatever it is, I'll be able to get there eventually'. (P59)</p>
<b>Adaptability</b>	<p>I feel like when you're forced to face your fears or something that you want to avoid you kind of have no choice but to make the best of it. (P54)</p> <p>I think I must be pretty stoic, I think that's a good word to use, adaptable to the situation, accepting, just going with the flow. Now I've always done that but in these circumstances I think that has held me in quite good stead because being that way just, you know, more or less on an even keel, has allowed me to not become too down about the whole thing and just to get on and do the things that I quite like doing, the trashy TV, the computing, enjoying a bit of sunshine and the reading. (P28)</p>

(Continues)



**TABLE 1** (Continued)

Theme or Subtheme	Participant Quotes
	So even if I'm caught in a delayed flight or situation, I think my personality type is such that it doesn't get bored, I will always find something to entertain myself... So that ability to quickly adapt to a change in situation. (P10)
	There are some people who have not done as well, struggled quite a bit with a lot of time on their own, and there're other people who have maybe struggled at times, but been able to kind of adapt more easily to being on their own... I had to adapt, you know, we adapt to the situation. (P50)
	Yeah. And this morning, it's been really, really wet, and I found water on the floor. And I thought, 'Have I got a leak somewhere, or did I just leave the door open?' And I'll think, 'I wish my husband was here to look at it. He would know where the water was coming from. I don't.' And that makes you feel—suddenly feel rather alone and isolated... Well, you just have to deal with it. You have no choice. You have to deal with it. So, you think, 'Well, it's there, it's happened.' You've got to get on with it. (P26)
	A lot of other people have experienced the same thing so you just get on with it. You accept it and just move on. (P28)
<b>Theme 2</b>	<b>Mindset Toward Solitude Fosters the Capacity to Benefit</b>
<b>Choosing solitude</b>	I think solitude involves a choice, even if it's only a choice to embrace it. The aloneness may be thrust upon you, but the attitude you take to it, I think, makes it either loneliness or solitude. (P27)
	If someone puts their mind into it they're capable of anything. If you think 'oh, this is a choice, I choose to be alone', I think they will be more accepting of it. (P42)
	I think choice is very important because I think there is also the interplay, at least for me, between that so-called desirable solitude versus enforced solitude. (P23)
	I think the thing that makes—aside from the fact that you need to be comfortable in your own skin and your own mind and heart, you could sit with yourself, you know—you've got a choice. (P06)
<b>Solitude for freedom</b>	And when you're by yourself it's, you know, yeah, you call the shots. (P09)
	I am allowed to be whatever I want to be, and feel however I want to feel, or do whatever I want in the moment that I'm in solitude. (P49)
	In the mental world, oh, you're free to do virtually anything you want. Just float off, you can be superman if you want. (P22)
<b>Solitude for authenticity</b>	I came to a kind of self-awareness of what really my priorities are in life, and so I do have a strong sense of what I want in life and what matters to me, and I do think that is only achievable from having thought about things and experienced things differently and written about things and allowed yourself the time to think about it, rather than getting overly influenced by other people's views. (P02)
	And it really helped me know who I am and be okay with that. Good, bad or otherwise. (P54)
	You are who you are, and you don't have to apologize for anything. You don't have to meet anyone's expectations, you just are. So, that feels free to me. (P38)
<b>Solitude for purpose</b>	It always has the potential to be meaningful, and I think the deliberateness with which you step into it can make it so if you want it to. (P35)
	This is when I'm taking time off by myself to think about my decision, weigh up the pros and cons and just go for an extended walk or just be by myself inside the bedroom for example and just try to make sense of all these things. (P34)
	Maybe it's a factor of things and maybe I need isolation, where for me it feels like this isolation actually is a very productive space as a creator. (P43)
<b>Using curiosity to flourish in solitude</b>	I think there's a sort of peacefulness about it and that space to explore, or the space to just be. I think that's special... when there is sort of a space to explore, to have that sense of wonder I think it connects with our own sense of sort of self and playfulness. (P23)
	And I feel like if you're not a curious person it just gets harder to fill up time because you don't want to, the things that you spend your time doing are usually the things that teach you, or things that interest you and if you have nothing that you're interested in or nothing that you want to learn about, then you're going to struggle finding something to do when you have free time. (P54)
	And learning what do you like, what are your thoughts, where do you go when you're alone. Do you think of good things, positive things, negative things. Why are you thinking. Asking yourself why are you doing all this stuff really helps getting to know yourself. (P41)
	Going back to the idea of curiosity about who you are, that also is a space for questioning actually, your values and actually trying to understand yourself and the way you react, or the way you interact with different issues or ideas, or scenarios around you. (P43)
	What I love the most about being alone is the fact that I create. I can be what my imagination tells me. I'm alone, I'm thinking but I want to be like this, so I can be like this, my mind lets me do that. (P44)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Theme or Subtheme	Participant Quotes
	It's more about refuelling myself and maybe taking myself on a little journey of reading something different or, yeah, trying a new running route or, I don't know, dipping in a different bit of the river or whatever. (P05)
	To have actual true time to myself is very rare which is very hard for me because I really love having to myself. It's when I'm creative. It's when I can really get into things, dive deeper into issues or just zone out I guess. (P18)
	But it's almost like this small realm...where it's just like I get to focus on me and my needs and my efforts, you know, kind of without interruption, without any constraints at all. (P11)
	It's more the freedom to just experiment and explore and go places in your mind and your heart. (P05)
	What I love the most about being alone is the fact that I create. I can be what my imagination tells me. I'm alone, I'm thinking but I want to be like this, so I can be like this, my mind lets me do that. (P44)
<b>Theme 4</b>	<b>Adaptive responses to discomfort when in solitude</b>
<b>Putting things in perspective</b>	You know, there is some element of going into it with positive emotions and with a sense of self-awareness, as well, and I think for a long time I used to just go into it without a lot of awareness and with a lot of negative emotion. And, I think when you go into it from that angle it can be a very negative experience and you feel very trapped and disconnected in it and lonely. (P35)
	I needed those times alone, I needed that solitude more than anything because you really need time away from distractions to really ask yourself real questions. You may know you're angry, but why are you really angry? You know you're hurt but why are you really hurt? And, you know, things that no-one else can tell you really, just you, it's you trying to assess it. I would sit down, I would go through the situation, I would go through elements of it and I would try to relate my thoughts, my feelings to sections or to parts of it that had happened and understand. (P59)
	I don't think I'd be where I am now if I'd not been able to embrace these periods of sort of solitude and stuff where I could really process my thoughts. I don't know what I would have done if I'd not had that time to really process and recall everything and deal with my thoughts. (P59)
	But when I am alone, yes, I think how lucky I am because I am here already, and that gave me the closest friend for me. And I feel like I am content with my life, although I have my future that I want to reach, but at least I do not have the problems that others are facing. At least my heart is overflowing with love instead of hurt and crying, like that, or loneliness. At least I have this happiness in my life. (P58)
	I like to think, and I like to sort of sit and kind of sort of toss ideas in my head. If ever I'm in a bad mood I would rather have a really good think about it first and I find if I'm not by myself somebody will inevitably go 'Oh, what's the matter, why are you in a mood?' or 'What's wrong?' and want to talk about it, and I genuinely process things better, I process a lot of my thoughts and feelings better if there is no interruption or nobody asking me every five minutes what's wrong. So, I find that I think and solve problems better when I'm by myself. (P56)
<b>Checking in with oneself</b>	There are certain traps in solitude that are easily avoided by just being reflective. Like the trap of negativity. Or a trap of what's wrong with this life, over generalizing. Or attributing the discomfort of solitude to something else. Or not knowing that something can be easily fixed by just paying attention to it in a different way. So these traps could be I think—for me at least they're avoided when I pay attention, when I reflect. When I talk to myself differently. (P21)
	Kind of checking in, not in a judgemental way but in a constructive way...And trying I guess to remember the wisdom of philosophies of kindness to oneself as well as kindness to other people. (P05)
	I think it still practices that way of being with yourself, kinder and more generous. (P35)
<b>Present-focused</b>	Like I'm working on a piece of writing and it's not going well and then I remember that I'm working alone, I don't have anybody to read this manuscript and give me some feedback...So when I get a concrete experience that is full of sensation that is free of judgement I can suspend those abstract thoughts. I can just very gently disengage from them...It is also possible to be grounded and also drift in a good way. To drift inwards and to drift away from negative thinking. Or thinking in general. And just be. (P21)
	So, I guess, that's the main thing about long periods of solitude, being connected with where you are. (P08)
	But I think for me like the relaxation part of the solitude also comes through kind of doing activity, you know, when nobody's around. And, you know, and so especially like even here, you know, if I can't go to the cabin for a weekend, I'll take off on a Sunday and I'll go for a hike for 4 or 5 hours by myself, and like I will come back just like totally replenished, right...I have moments where like I definitely slip into, you know, just really being in the moment, and I might realize it after because it's fleeting. But, you know, it still really counts for me. (P11)

**1.2 Personality factors that promoted well-being** were understood as qualities that participants observed within themselves outside the solitude context and which were fairly stable characteristics that were carried more globally across domains. Although global, participants felt that they shaped the way they responded to being alone meaningfully. Throughout interviews, participants offered thoughts on how these personality factors contributed to their well-being in solitude. The dominant themes that we recognized included references to introversion, independence/confidence, capacity for introspection, dispositional optimism and adaptability.

**1.3 Introversion.** Perhaps not surprisingly, dispositional introversion was a popular theme among participants, which they often identified by name, suggesting it was part of their identity associated with solitude. Indeed, introversion is used colloquially and feeds into identities that are formed through a popular culture understanding of psychology (Noya & Vernon, 2019). For our participants, their 'introvert' identity contributed to their host of reasons for enjoying and benefiting from solitude. In the context of describing their introversion, solitude was often pinpointed as a way to balance time spent with others and even used as a retreat or recovery space from those interactions. Interestingly, it was not only introverts who enjoyed the benefits of solitude, but participants who identified as extraverts also talked about seeking and needing solitude as a way to recover from higher energy or higher demand social interactions.

**1.4 Self-reliance.** Many participants attributed their well-being in solitude to either innate or learned independence or confidence. Some described having been born with that attribute or acquiring it as a child, whereas others mentioned gaining independence or confidence in early adulthood (while travelling solo or moving to a foreign country, for example). They described this as providing a solid foundation on which they could be resilient in solitude in the present. Participants also talked about similar attributes, which they believed positively impacted time alone including wilfulness and determination.

**1.5 Capacity for introspection and self-reflection.** Participants also described solitude as a better place for people who are willing and able to engage in self-observation and reflection. Many participants expressed ideas around their successful alone time being reliant on their ability and willingness to look at memories, quandaries or arguments, for example, and to reflect on them. Importantly, participants described entertaining positive thoughts in solitude but many also talked about using it as a time to process grief, grievances, stress and uncertainty. The difficulty of those reflections sometimes made solitude less comfortable for them but it did not affect their overall ability to stay in that space and achieve a certain goal (thinking through a financial problem, going over a recent argument with a friend, or writing about a deceased partner, for example).

**1.6 Dispositional optimism.** The importance of having a positive outlook or being an optimist, identified by name, came up often in our interviews in relation to well-being in solitude. Some participants touched on being generally content, but others mentioned having an understanding that, with their optimistic attitude, they are capable of moulding their own life happiness, including their feeling of contentment in solitude. Optimism in this sample was therefore described as a

general tendency to consciously or even deliberately, for some, adopt a mindset of looking for, and expecting, the best of solitude experiences.

**1.7 Adaptability.** During our interviews, we heard a lot from people who describe themselves as generally flexible, from those individuals who naturally adjust to changing states or conditions and from others with a learned willingness to accept life's complexities. Participants both described that ability outright. In other interviews, we observed that participants who did well in solitude were agile and ready to accept the situation when solitude was thrust upon them, either temporarily (as in a flight delay) or for a longer period (such as after the diagnosis of serious illness or the loss of a child or partner).

### 3.2 | Theme Two: Mindsets toward solitude fosters the capacity to benefit

Theme Two involved factors that allowed individuals to take full advantage of the solitude space—a space that is less structured and externally regulated than social time (Weinstein et al., 2023). Many of our participants voluntarily sought solitude in their daily lives because of the benefits they perceived to await them there. This mindset of seeing solitude as a space of possible, even probable, fulfilment seems to foster well-being in terms of feeling the space was a positive one. These mindsets were prominent antecedents that allowed people to enjoy solitude, so they shapes Theme Two of our solitude factors. Table 1 presents additional extracts that informed this theme.

**2.1 Choosing solitude.** One mindset employed by our participants was viewing one's time in solitude as a choice—an experience they opted into—regardless of how they landed there. Many of our participants expressed a clear understanding of the differences between solitude and loneliness and solitude and isolation. They pointed specifically to the issue of choice and how that affects what time alone feels like. Some interviewees also had an advanced grasp of how choosing solitude is a decision they make, a commitment to themselves, to do self-care or self-reflection. Some even described it as an indulgence and expressed gratitude for being able to choose to be alone, because of the benefits they perceived are possible there. Importantly, some participants expressed that, even though they may not always have made the choice to be alone, they understand that they still have the choice to embrace it and that decision leads to a positive experience of solitude.

**2.2 Seeking solitude for freedom.** Participants gave many accounts of pursuing solitude because they saw it as a valued space for experiencing autonomy and freedom, to do what one chooses, with endless opportunities to pursue thoughts and interests, self-sufficiently and at one's own pace. For many of our participants, solitude was a coveted space of endless possibilities, or it offered treasured moments of freedom to do as one wants.

**2.3 Seeking solitude for authenticity.** Participants also described seeking solitude to tap into their real, authentic selves and to become more connected to themselves and more self-aware. Participants described moments of solitude as critical to understanding better their nature, perspectives, priorities and goals. In short, they sought solitude

because time alone—free from outside influences—gave them space to grow into better versions of themselves.

**2.4 Seeking solitude for purpose.** Many participants also used solitude to fulfil a number of purpose-oriented goals, from feeling calm and peaceful or recharged and restored, to feeling more balanced, capable and confident in their daily lives. Whether they were meditating, learning a new language, painting a room or going for a walk, participants could envision potential periods of solitude as positive because there was something they could achieve there, however big or small. They described those pursuits as goals—from simply having fun to making sense of things, or finding the meaning of life—which shape their solitude into a pleasant, necessary or meaningful endeavor.

**2.5 Using curiosity to flourish in solitude.** An emotion that pressed participants forward into the solitude space and sustained them there was curiosity. Having a sense of curiosity, or desire for inquiry into themselves, others or the greater world in that moment, led them to feel that time alone was beneficial. For many of our self-described curious participants, solitude was best when it was a place for 'wonder', 'exploration' and 'discovery' where they could follow their curiosity into creative pursuits, rewarding or interesting questions, or anywhere at all. This was in part expressed through descriptions that solitude was an invaluable time to experiment, imagine, follow whims, or focus intensely on what was in their hearts and minds. In time alone, lacking outside distractions, they had a more predictable space where they could 'try on' different interests and desires, or achieve a different vantage point. More than one participant described solitude as a 'bubble' in which they encapsulated themselves to achieve greater creativity, confidence or focus.

### 3.3 | Theme Three: Adaptive responses to discomfort when in solitude

Our third theme (elaborated in Table 1) was the strategies described by participants that used when struggling to access the benefits of solitude. In such instances, participants talked about managing negative emotions that may arise as a result of being alone by employing a range of adaptive responses to help regulate their emotions, including being conversational with and accepting of themselves; putting things in perspective and being aware, or present in the moment. These techniques allowed individuals, who described occasionally faltering in the solitude space, to adapt to or to reframe that experience in real time and for the better. They expressed that any discomfort they felt in solitude was adjustable. Ultimately, knowing how to manage oneself in that space when negative feelings about being alone arise were seen to be an important well-being factor.

**3.1 Putting things in perspective.** Some people described how solitude could be a space in which they feel 'trapped', 'disconnected' or 'lonely'. Instead of abandoning alone time during those moments of discomfort, they were able to shift their perspective by recognizing that the solitude space was not what was uncomfortable—it was the emotions they were processing while in it, perhaps from a bad day at work,

or anxiety about an upcoming presentation. That allowed them to shift gears and focus on something else, if they chose to, or to recognize that the solitude space could be a productive one in which to process those negative feelings. Others were able to confront feelings of unease with gratitude—feeling lucky to have those moments alone and valuing it as a 'luxury', 'indulgence', or even a 'privilege'.

**3.2 Checking in with oneself/treating oneself with compassion.** Many participants expressed awareness that solitude is a time when, lacking outside distractions, they may be inclined to ruminate on a negative thought, perhaps while dwelling on a past argument or mistake. Aware of the pitfalls of that way of thinking, they recognized they were being negative or self-judgmental and reminded themselves to think more constructively and 'befriend' themselves through 'patience', 'kindness', or 'generosity'.

**3.3 Being focused on the present.** Being present in the moment/being observant was also seen to be instrumental. This sometimes specifically referred to an ongoing meditation or mindfulness practice but also to the general sense that individuals were 'in tune' with their thoughts, emotions and actions while in solitude. Whatever they were doing at the time—gardening, walking or playing the guitar—mattered less than the effort to be completely present in that activity.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The study of what makes our daily solitude positive is still in its early stages and our research suggests there are multiple factors that determine whether solitude is likely to be beneficial or detrimental. These factors include both those that are fairly stable across time and life's domains (i.e., personality) or may have been experienced earlier in development and those that represent individuals' mindset in relation to their solitude, specifically, and may be stable or malleable. Within moments of solitude, we found that some participants had distinctive approaches to interacting with it in a positive way when life events made it more difficult to be alone (for example, when lockdowns led to excessive unwanted solitude)—they shared tools and strategies for managing and maximizing the solitude experience.

Our participants' insights about their positive solitary experiences mirror previous findings of quantitative research. Much like a broader body of research on resilience, understood in terms of experiencing wellness even after circumstances that are quite difficult, the qualities of adaptability, flexibility and optimism (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Pathak & Lata, 2018) aided individuals during their time in solitude. Some personality factors that seemed to lend themselves to experiencing positive solitude, such as introversion, supported other views that introverted individuals benefit more from time spent in solitude (Zelenski et al., 2013). However, it is worth highlighting that the extraverts in our sample also reflected on the benefits they gained from solitude and how they used it as a space to recover from high-energy activities. Participants also brought up other characteristics, like independence/confidence and capacity for introspection, which

added more dimension to the profile of who tends to be resilient in solitude.

Some of our participants attributed their enjoyment of solitude to their introversion but the findings of quantitative research on this topic have suggested the opposite. Introverts, considered as those with lower extraversion scores on self-reported scales, experience more lonely solitude (Long et al., 2003), while extraverts report more self-determined motivation for solitude (Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). One study found no evidence that introversion related to daily self-determined motivation for solitude (Nguyen et al., 2022). As such, the link between introversion and enjoyment of solitude could be a lay theory because people colloquially associate an introvert with someone who likes to be alone (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998). However, it is important to distinguish between preference for solitude and enjoyment of it. Solitude preference has also been found to be largely dysfunctional and associated with lower, rather than higher, well-being (Burger, 1995) but the ability to embrace solitude for its benefits is a separate concept that has been linked to well-being (Thomas & Azmitia, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019). Alternatively, there could be a discrepancy in the way scientists conceptualize introversion and how laypeople think about this personality. Currently, the way that extraversion-introversion dimension is operationalized in the empirical literature attributes more positively valenced characteristics to extraverts than introverts (Cullen-Lester et al., 2016). As such, positive characteristics of introversion such as enjoyment of solitude might be left uncaptured by the current extraversion-introversion measures available in the literature.

Conversely, findings concerning dispositional optimism and adaptability are well aligned with a broader literature outside of the work on solitude that highlights these qualities as important for well-being because they confer a general tendency to cope well across both positive and negative emotional situations. For example, the use of positive expectations in optimism moderates the effects of stressors on depressive symptoms (Kleiman et al., 2017) and promoting optimism is considered a generally powerful intervention to promote lifelong resilience (Reivich et al., 2013). Perhaps even more integral than optimism, the tendency towards adaptability is at the heart of well-being during difficult circumstances and may even define it (Folke et al., 2010; Pike et al., 2010).

Our themes of stable tendencies towards self-reliance and the capacity for introspection may have been even more specific to benefiting from the experience of being alone. Solitude provides ample time to be alone with one's experiences, thoughts and emotions and therefore presents both an opportunity and a challenge to be connected with oneself. Positive solitude also allows opportunities for individuals to regulate and engage in behaviors that serve to satisfy their needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence (Weinstein et al., 2023). The current findings suggested that those benefits might be more salient for those who tended to be interested and focused inward. People with this tendency were generally more welcoming of this time, either because they could find more benefit within it or because they were more receptive to the internal experiences that came up when alone. The finding supports the role of both awareness and ownership

over one's thoughts and feelings in influencing the person's willingness to access and incorporate new information that can be gained from experiences such as solitude (Weinstein et al., 2013). This tendency to be aware and take ownership over one's internal experience is a characteristic of someone who has a more autonomous orientation (Weinstein et al., 2012). In this study, we observed that solitude experiences were beneficial when the integrative process was alive and well in individuals and, even more so as we delved into Theme 2, we saw the positive impact that curiosity and interest taking, and a lively internal world, have on solitude.

Indeed, as discussions moved away from 'dispositions' to reflecting on specific instances of solitude, we observed that the same processes of introspection and curiosity were at play and that they formed the mindset that characterized the approach to those instances. Our participants described that believing they had something to gain was enough for them to set the stage for a positive experience in solitude. What they expected to gain varied widely, but whether it was a peaceful feeling or a greater sense of connectedness to oneself, the overall mindset that fostered well-being in solitude among our participants was that it was an autonomous time of freedom and opportunity when near anything was possible. This evidence—that perceived affordances drove the sense of choice and value that individuals felt when they considered their reasons for being alone—spoke to the importance of embodying those perceptions (Lay et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). In this study, even in the absence of instructions, this was a prominent theme that people discussed.

These findings within the broader literature on benefits of certain mindsets in helping people withstand challenging experiences can be useful for understanding how to cope with difficult periods of solitude. Specifically, mindsets identified in this study might be even more important for positive solitude outcomes when solitude periods are extended (i.e., isolation), for those who live alone, or when in solitude due to uncontrollable circumstances such as physical impairments or illnesses that prevent participation in social activities. Alternatively, their beneficial effects that we observed may not generalize to these populations and other factors may be better suited to understanding how to increase well-being in such groups. To date, there is only one study that has manipulated mindset by instructing some participants to reflect on the benefits of solitude and found that this group showed more positive outcomes compared to those who reflected on how lonely solitude is (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Work exploring how expectations and intentionality shape solitude experiences is needed.

Themes concerning mindset also spoke to the question, are some predisposed to experiencing well-being in solitude, or are those also teachable attributes? Can someone who is not inherently curious learn to treat their time alone with openness and inquiry? Nascent research on the topic has documented that a brief reappraisal encouraging individuals to approach solitude with the mindset that it offers positive opportunities can reduce loneliness during time spent alone (Rodriguez et al., 2020). In the current study, curiosity and inquiry recurred as important aspects of someone's ability to experience positive solitude. Framing alone time as moments of exploration, wonder and discovery led our participants to experiment, imagine, create or focus on



whatever they wanted to in those moments and that ultimately led to well-being in solitude. In future research, cognitive reappraisals may focus on these specific forms of reframing for optimal effects.

In a similar vein, our findings showed that there were a number of different adaptive responses employed by those resilient in solitude to shift from potentially negative to positive solitude. Our participants talked about a variety of strategies for making time alone more manageable and fruitful including being present in the moment, having perspective, accepting one's emotional state and exercising self-compassion. These were all techniques intended to steer themselves away from the 'traps of solitude' as one participant put it, like rumination and loneliness.

This research sets the stage for quantitative work that could examine these factors from an updated set of a-priori models. These models may consider the influence of personality styles and the capacity for introspection and self-connection or self-reliance among the most intriguing because solitude offers an opportunity to connect with the self (Weinstein et al., 2023) in a way that makes it enjoyable. Future studies should also consider situational and mindset-specific characteristics, as our current work suggests that curiosity, self-compassion and choice are at the forefront of predicting when solitude is positive.

Future research may also consider the role that culture plays in well-being to consider whether it moderates factors identified here. In previous research, Wang (2006) showed that Chinese students rated enlightenment as one of the most desirable aspects of solitude but preferred the freedom in it less than American students. It may be intuitive to assume that those from collectivistic cultures who are expected to value interpersonal connections and harmony would prefer spending time alone less, but findings show Chinese adolescents view solitude more positively than their Belgian counterparts (Maes et al., 2016). Similarly, van Zyl et al. (2018) also found that those identifying with collectivistic cultures were more likely to spend time alone by choice than those from individualistic cultures in South Africa. In summary, there is still much to learn about influences at many levels of analysis (including personality, state and culture) on how time spent alone is experienced.

Future research should account for a changing relationship with solitude across age groups. For example, previous research has shown that older adults develop an ability to structure their time alone better (Larson, 1990). Older adults also experience more positive affect in solitude (Lay et al., 2020). A broader theoretical framework, such as socioemotional selectivity, could provide insights into why older adults cope better with time spent alone (Löckenhoff & Carstensen, 2004) as it can be fraught with negative experiences like self-rumination and loneliness. Old age is a time when people have gained better ability to regulate emotions (Charles, 2010; Urry & Gross, 2010) and also to embrace low-arousal positive affect such as calmness and peace which is available in solitude (Scheibe et al., 2013). Overall, older adults in our sample described solitude as positive and meaningful but we did not ask them specifically to describe how their experiences have evolved over time and how they have adapted to being alone. Additional, careful work examining these issues may bring about deeper insights, which are more sensitive to experiences across the lifespan.

The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when many were required to spend extended time at home. Even though our participants were clear in how their discussions referred to their solitude outside of lockdown periods, the pandemic might have changed relationship with solitude differently for those in particular circumstances. For living-alone adults, solitude during lockdowns may have been especially challenging because their options for social interactions were further limited (Wilson-Genderson et al., 2021). Single women who lived alone during the pandemic also found that the prolonged and enforced isolation made it challenging to enjoy silence and solitude (Gao & Sai, 2020), or to engage in leisure activities due to concerns about safety (Giles & Oncescu, 2021). On the other hand, those who lived with family, particularly with young children, may have felt deprived of alone time and may have come to appreciate it more than before (Goldberg et al., 2021). Aside from the personality and mindset variables we have discussed above, external factors such as living situations (e.g., living in a busy household vs living alone) may be important for shaping well-being in solitude.

We were interested in interviewing individuals from different backgrounds, who could speak to their varied experiences in solitude with some depth, but individuals who were non-resilient in solitude were highly underrepresented in this sample. As such, findings should be understood as reflecting prototypes of ideal solitude experiences and additional research should focus on well-being in the face of negative solitude and isolation—specifically, on both strength and vulnerability factors. It is unclear whether the absence of those predictive factors identified here would translate to fewer negative experiences of solitude, or whether orthogonal vulnerability factors explain loneliness, boredom and anxiety during time spent alone. It is also unclear whether the predictive factors identified here would translate to greater well-being during prolonged periods of isolation such as in extensive lockdowns or when health conditions bar social contact beyond typical circumstances (Nicholson, 2012) and future research is needed to explore well-being in these more difficult circumstances. Indeed, solitude may come in different forms as a function of being choiceful or forced on individuals (Galanaki, 2004) and resilience factors may be specific to those characteristics of time spent alone.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Our main objective in conducting 60 qualitative interviews with participants from a highly diverse demographic was to understand the basic factors that contribute to well-being in solitude. Using a qualitative research approach instead of relying on self-reported scales with items predetermined by the researchers provided broader opportunities to explore lay theories that individuals held about their own solitary experiences. For example, there is little existing research that would have led us to expect that curiosity and optimism would be centrally useful mindset tools for positive solitude but participants' accounts made these factors salient. Also evident in participants' responses was their use of mental tools on-hand in solitude, which they employed to adjust to, cope with, and make the most of time alone. The expressed



strengths that participants applied to their solitude might not necessarily translate to direct evidence of causal links between variables but those insights can be further developed in future quantitative research and tested directly.

Qualitative data can also be used to validate previous quantitative findings and allow us to examine whether observed correlations between measurements are also consistent with our participants' open-ended responses. Specifically, aligning with the existing quantitative literature (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019; Lay et al., 2020), the role of choice—both choosing the solitude state and deciding what to do and how to feel while alone—seemed particularly important in influencing the ability to experience well-being in solitude.

In all, this research has provided some exciting insights into those who tend to experience well-being in solitude and why. By understanding more about the backgrounds, personality characteristics and mindsets of individuals who flourish when alone we may be able to begin to mold solitude into a more welcoming and desirable place.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was conducted in line with BPS and APA guidelines and received approval from the University of Reading School of Psychology ethics committee. Participants provided full informed consent before taking part.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No.

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