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The Impact of Spending Time Alone on Emerging Adults' Mental Well-Being

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Purposefully spending time alone with the intention of self-care can lead to mental health benefits for emerging adults. However, when the motivation for spending time alone is rooted in the desire to be socially avoidant, emerging adults may find themselves becoming isolated and may experience increased levels of anxiety and/or depression. Effective solitude excludes any other individuals and the use of social media. As emerging adults purposefully spend time alone, they are creating opportunities for self-reflection that may then lead to the strengthened development of emotional regulation skills. The ability to emotionally regulate provides the necessary tools to cope with stressful situations, such as transitioning to college or entering into a romantic relationship. This literature review discusses the relationship between self-care and improved emotional regulation and mental well-being as well as the relationship of purposefully spending time alone and overall mental health.

In recent years, the mental health of emerging adults has been recognized as a public health concern (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019; Gunnell et al., 2020). The number of professionally diagnosed mental health disorders has significantly increased, especially within the specific domain of university students in the emerging adult age range of 18 to 29 years old (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019; Clifford & Nelson, 2019). Although a wide range of mental health concerns can affect college students, the prevailing mental health disorders are generally mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019), which may be sparked through the stressful transition to college life.

When students of the emerging adult age transition from home life to university life, they may be exposed to many stressors that may negatively impact their mental health (Barkham et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2018). For example, the transition to university life may bring increasing financial stress, especially as emerging adults arrange to pay for tuition, housing, food, and other expenses and as they are introduced to debt by taking out student loans (Barkham et al., 2019; Clifford & Nelson, 2019; Rogers et al., 2018). In addition to financial stress, university students can find social stress in adapting to a new social environment (Barkham et al., 2019; Clifford

& Nelson, 2019; Rogers et al., 2018), which includes interacting with many new people on campus, living with roommates, and making new friends. The impact that these and other stressors, such as heavy coursework and reduced nutrition and sleep, may have on a student's mental health can be significant. However, recent research has demonstrated that in spite of higher occurrences of mood and anxiety disorders in this population, the impact can be lessened through intentionally spending time alone (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

While the preference for spending time alone is commonly associated with having an introverted personality or fear of socialization, this assumption is often mistakenly made when it is confused with what it means to be unsociable (Coplan et al., 2019; Jorgensen & Nelson, 2018; Zava et al., 2019). *Unsociability* refers to a desire for spending time alone that does not stem from a social anxiety or desire to avoid a social encounter (Coplan et al., 2019). Rather, a defining characteristic of unsociability is to be intrinsically motivated to spend time alone (Coplan et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018). Intrinsic motivation with regards to spending time alone involves having an intentional purpose for deciding to take time for oneself (Coplan et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018). An intentional purpose for spending time alone that is rooted in a focus on self-care often carries significant mental health benefits (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

Purposefully spending time alone for self-care may play an important role in the development of an emerging adult's emotional regulation and perspective of self (Barkham et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019). Healthy self-care involves an individual self-reflecting on his or her own thoughts, feelings, and taking time for introspection of the motivation for his or her actions (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). When emerging adults are able to take time to personally reflect on their emotions, they are developing their ability to emotionally regulate, making it easier to make more rational decisions (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). Thus, making time for consistent self-care is important for emerging adults during the transition to college because it may help them avoid feeling

overwhelmed, burnt out, and/or excessively fatigued by helping them recognize when they need a break from their stressors (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Kaniuka et al., 2019).

The type of activity performed in solitude and the amount of time spent in solitude that may produce the most positive results are likely to vary from one individual to the next (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). However, key factors that may contribute to productive and effective time spent in solitude for the general college student include an intentional motivation to spend time alone and the absence of both social media use and the presence of other individuals in the immediate environment (Nguyen et al., 2018; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). Essentially, activities that allow individuals to focus on their own thoughts and motivations for personal actions across a period of time without distractions are those most likely to produce the positive effects on mental health (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

Thus, although emerging adults' mental health may be negatively affected by stress during significant life transitions, such as starting college, actively focusing on self-care through purposefully taking time for oneself during these transitions may be beneficial for emerging adults' mental health because purposeful solitude provides an opportunity for emerging adults to utilize self-care to develop positive psychological outcomes that ultimately may benefit their mental health. As will be discussed in this literature review, those periods of intentional self-reflection can lead to better emotional regulation skills and mental well-being, thereby equipping emerging adults with necessary tools to make important life decisions, such as those regarding romantic relationships and achieving academic success. This literature review first discusses the relationship between self-care and improved emotional regulation and mental well-being and then discusses the relationship of purposefully spending time alone to the overall mental health of emerging adults.

Self-Care and Emotional Regulation and Well-Being

Self-care is commonly referred to as the ability for individuals to care for themselves psychologically and physically while needing also to be mentally present in various life roles, such as pursuing a degree or career and/or parenthood (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Barkham et al., 2019; Kaniuka et al., 2019). In the various roles of a college student's life, the intense stress that can upset the balance between fulfilling responsibilities and tending to one's own well-being may result in negative outcomes, such as experiencing burnout or psychological impairment where the affected individual notices a significant decline in their overall mental and physical functioning (Arcuri

Sanders et al., 2019; Barkham et al., 2019). Burnout often negatively impacts the ability of the emerging adult to function academically and socially, sometimes leading to declining levels of mental health (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Barkham et al., 2019). With the number of diagnoses of mental health disorders rising rapidly among emerging-adult-aged college students (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018), the practice of self-care could potentially help them become better emotionally regulated and maintain a healthier overall mental well-being.

Quality self-care has been shown to heighten the development of emotional regulation (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). Emotional regulation pertains to the ability to have control over one's own emotions, especially during times of stress (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). Since college life can be a stressful time for many, this ability to regulate emotions can be a key factor in a student's academic performance (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). Researchers indicate that the level of a student's academic success may be significantly related to the quality of their self-care practices (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Kaniuka et al., 2019). When individuals develop a sensitivity to their own personal values and interests, they may be better prepared to regulate their overall behavior and may experience a heightened sense of self-confidence (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Individuals who are comfortable with their own sense of self and able to control their behaviors through positive emotional regulation experience higher quality romantic relationships and friendships (Jorgensen & Nelson, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). Relationships are partially built on how well we can connect with one another as human beings; thus, emotional regulation allows individuals to process their own emotions and address general social challenges (Jorgensen & Nelson, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). As emotional regulation develops, it can encourage emotional connection to others, including sensitivity in logically processing and relating to others' feelings (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019), which ultimately strengthens those relationships and the individual's overall social environment.

Strong relationships with friends and romantic partners can also improve an individual's mental well-being (Auerbach et al., 2018; Clifford & Nelson, 2019; Jorgensen & Nelson, 2018). Mental well-being in emerging-adult-aged college students can be described as positive feelings about themselves that also reflect an inner motivation to balance life stressors (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019; Hewitt, 2019). As these emerging adults

experience various shifts in their environment, including social dynamic shifts related to being surrounded by new peers; academic shifts, which may include changing study majors or emphases; and/or autonomy shifts that come from moving out of the parental house and into a new living situation where there might be less supervision and more freedom, stability found in self-care can ground the individual mentally and provide a necessary consistency that may help level stress or improve overall mental well-being (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019).

In sum, as reports of mental health disorders are steadily rising on college campuses (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018) and college mental health counseling centers are often unable to keep up with the demand, teaching students to effectively participate in self-care may be a promising approach (Auerbach et al., 2018; Barkham et al., 2019). As students learn how to better care for their mental and physical well-being and put those skills into practice, they are better prepared to be more productive and succeed in their academic, personal, and work lives (Arcuri Sanders et al., 2019; Kaniuka et al., 2019). Finally, the practice of self-care can increase personal functioning making an individual better prepared to contribute qualitatively to his or her other friendships and romantic relationships.

Relationship of Purposefully Spending Time Alone to Overall Mental Health

Solitude, or spending time alone, carries the possibility of resulting in both negative and positive outcomes (Clifford & Nelson, 2019; Jorgensen & Nelson, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). Whether or not the outcome is positive or negative depends strongly on the motivation for individuals spending their time in solitude (Clifford & Nelson, 2019; Coplan et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013). Those who prefer solitude over spending time with peers may be motivated by social anxiety or a dislike of people, which leads to finding themselves becoming more and more isolated from their social surroundings (Nguyen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013). This kind of isolation—a prolonged solitude and lack of socialization with peers—in college students can negatively impact a student's mental health significantly, leading to the possible development of substance abuse, depression, and/or anxiety (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013). Isolation in this context may be detrimental to the development of emerging adults' socialization abilities because they are more likely to fail to establish both platonic and romantic in-person relationships, leading to possible long-term negative effects regarding their future ability to form those types of connections (Nguyen et al.,

2019; Wang et al., 2013). Consequently, in circumstances where a desire for solitude may be fueled through social avoidance or social expectations, solitude will likely not be beneficial to mental health.

In contrast, a desire for solitude that is driven by intentional motivation may ultimately be used as a tool to positively impact the overall mental health and well-being of emerging-adult-aged college students (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). In order to be positively affected by spending time alone, individuals' motivations should be self-determined, and individuals themselves should be proactive in how they choose to spend their time alone (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). A healthy self-determination in regards to solitude includes an individual's desire to retire to solitude for the purpose of self-reflection (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019) or emotional regulation (Nguyen et al., 2018). Self-reflection, which falls under the umbrella of self-care, when performed in solitude, is especially beneficial because it takes place in the absence of social or peer pressures, thus allowing the individual to focus on his or her personal thoughts, beliefs, and actions, or to regroup from general life stressors (e.g., school, work, social groups, etc.) (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Individuals who intentionally and purposefully spend time in solitude may benefit in their overall well-being, specifically through the potential development of higher self-esteem levels, lower levels of depression, and stronger emotional regulation skills (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). The development of emotional regulation and increased self-esteem are benefits that can come from solitude related to autonomous motivation, meaning that an individual feels in control of their motivation and decision to spend time alone (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019). Although specifically introverted individuals might more regularly enjoy spending their time alone due to their personality type, any individual, regardless of personality type, can also benefit from solitude when it reliably provides a space for genuine self-reflection that might not otherwise be as easy to attain when constantly surrounded by peers (Nguyen et al., 2018; Thomas & Azmitia, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, emerging adults' mental well-being may be benefited through the practice of self-care in purposeful time spent alone, especially during stressful life transitions, such as transitioning to college life. As long as time spent in solitude is time spent without social media or the presence of other individuals and involves intentional motivation for

overall well-being, then solitude has the ability to positively impact the individual's life. Additionally, the type of activity or quantity of time spent under these conditions leading to healthy outcomes may vary from one individual to the next. Emerging adults, especially emerging adults attending college, should seek to intentionally carve out time regularly in their schedules to spend time alone without distractions. By practicing self-care and self-reflection during their time

alone, they may experience heightened awareness of their emotions and behaviors, leading to an increased sense of emotional regulation and overall mental well-being.

Lisa P. Dixon is a recent graduate of Brigham Young University's School of Family Life and an aspiring child psychologist.

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