

opinion

Alone but not lonely: Staying sane when you're solo

Being on your own and unable to meet people at this troubling time is possibly one of the hardest things you will ever have done. However, let's turn this situation on its head and view it as a rare time of peace and calm. It's a golden opportunity to find out more about what makes you tick, to develop new skills and to really focus on yourself. Here are ten ideas for how to enrich your life while you're waiting for the restrictions to be lifted:

1. Start a diary. As the old saying goes, a problem shared is a problem halved. Writing down your fears and concerns is actually a way of sharing them; you feel lighter after doing it, as if you have offloaded the problems somewhere else. Rereading your words further down the line can help you see how you're feeling in a more detached way.

2. Learn to cook six basic dishes spectacularly well. I love to have an Italian tomato sauce simmering gently for hours on the stove, it makes my whole house smell like Italy! Research some recipes, get the necessary ingredients and don't be scared to deviate from the recipe to make interesting new flavour combinations. The BBC Food website at www.bbc.co.uk/food, for example, has more than 10,000 recipes.

3. If you have a garden, get out there and get your hands dirty! Look at various plants, flowers and shrubs online, and find ones that appeal to you aesthetically and are easy to maintain. Also, consider growing your own fruit and veg; it always tastes that little bit better if you've harvested it yourself. If you don't have a garden, you can easily grow colourful plants or tasty vegetables in a window box. Also, consider getting an allotment. In Norwich, the Sustainable Living Initiative (www.grow-our-own.co.uk) offers smaller plots, and they even give you the seeds and plants, lend

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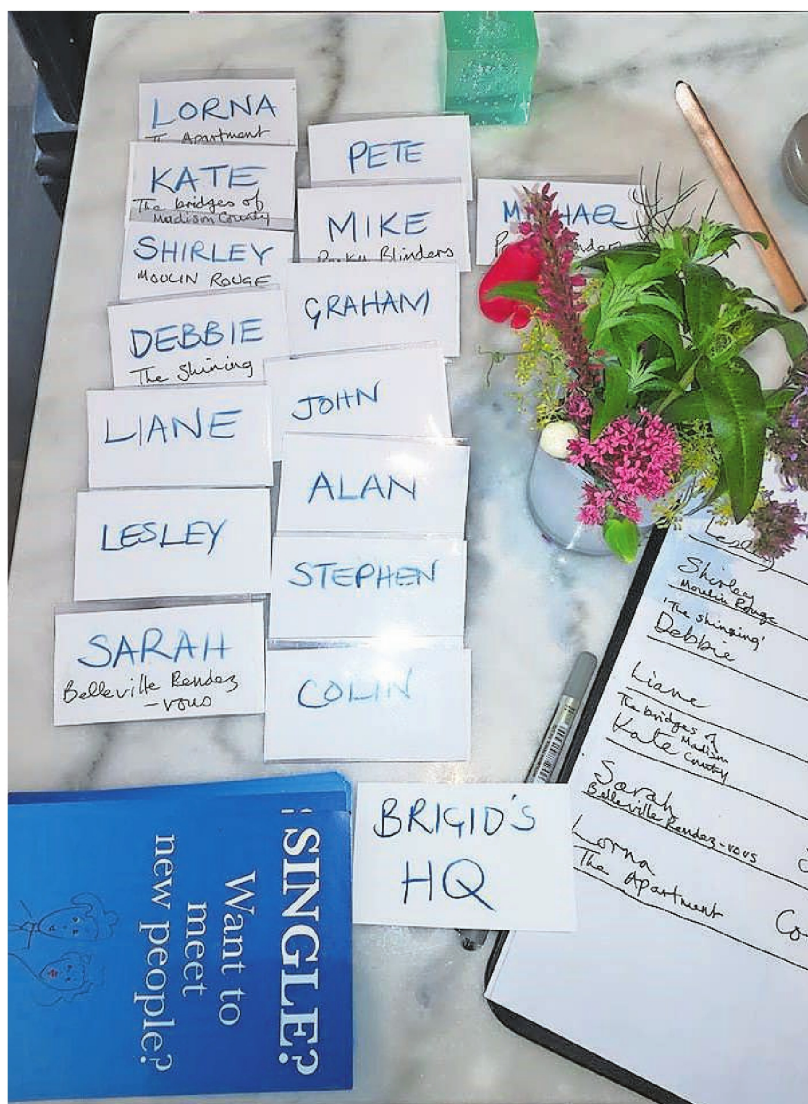
you the tools and offer help and advice.

4. Go back through your life and write down all the people you have been in a relationship with, or had a crush on, or found inspiring. Think about each relationship: did it make you blossom? Did it make you feel insecure? We rarely reflect on the past in a constructive way. Try to focus on the good bits of relationships, and how to make them happen again.

5. Create Pinterest boards. These are a great way to visualise the things you love; whether it's clothes, home furnishings, food, far-flung places or anything else that takes your fancy. Just start an account at pinterest.com, and start populating virtual pinboards that reflect your loves, passions and preferences. Structuring what you like and who you are can really help to give you focus. www.pinterest.com

6. Keep a dream diary. Dreams are a great way to access your subconscious self. You dream every night. The more you remember your dreams, the more you will learn about yourself. Have a writing book and pen by your bedside, and keep your eyes closed when you wake up. Go over the dream again, write five words that describe that dream, and then write as much as you can remember. You will be amazed how your dreams develop.

7. Get running or walk quickly on your daily exercise. Get yourself some proper running shoes; it makes all the difference. 'Speed walking' is a brilliant way to raise your heart rate without putting as much impact



through your legs as jogging does. Alternatively, if you have a bicycle, use a website such as www.plotaroute.com to plan peaceful rural rides in your vicinity. Even if you live in the heart of Norwich, you can be out in the countryside within 10 minutes and back home within an hour.

8. Write letters. Get some paper and a good pen and hand-write a letter to someone. Letter-writing is a dying art in the information age, and it is such a pleasure to receive one. People keep letters and often reread them; you'll definitely make someone's day. Why not also go through your old photos, and

send someone a photo of themselves from the past?

9. Explore and really experience music. It can be a liberating experience to 'dance like no one's watching'. Now is your chance to try new genres, get emotional to beautiful ballads or headbang to heavy metal. Try to compile at least half a dozen favourite tracks/artists you can tell people about and why you like them. Or, for a real challenge, why not learn to play an instrument?

10. Practising mindfulness and meditation could be the most important thing you do during this lockdown period. You're not trying to empty your head of

thoughts; you're simply teaching yourself to recognise them, accept them and move on. Learning mindful breathing exercises will help you to calm yourself when you're experiencing negative emotions, both now and in the future. If you can slow and control your breathing, your body and mind will both be in a better place. There are lots of resources at www.freemindfulness.org and an NHS-approved course for just £30 at www.bemindfulonline.com.

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