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OPINION

An isolated beach shack has finally made me feel like myself again



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Even the nine-hour drive by myself to the beach house near Adelaide was just what I needed. No stopping because someone else wanted a coffee or a wee. An entire podcast series of my choice. No talking, other than the voice in my head: “How good.”

Knowing I had a book deadline and lingering pneumonia, my friend Pies offered me her place in a South Australian town with a long beach and no shops. The house is a 1960s time capsule where our families have spent memorable holidays over decades. This time, nobody else would be there. It would be all mine.



Pies' beach house. KATE HALFPENNY

The idea of 12 days to write and recover with only myself to look after was intoxicating. I packed two pairs of tracky dacks, my wetsuit and boogie board, a tin of lemon slice, an electric blanket and a leopard print fake fur coat. Hit the road.

At the house, I made a pot of chicken soup and ate nothing else but that and chocolate every day. Without a TV, at night I listened to the second season of the podcast and did tapestry. Went to bed early, got up early to walk. Wrote and read and bought old band t-shirts at the op shop two small towns over.

In a world that often bombards us with the notion that happiness lies in constant connection, I'm discovering something surprising and profound: the joy of solitude.

In midlife, being alone feels like the ultimate luxury. It's not about loneliness or withdrawing from the world. It's about actively reclaiming time for myself and relishing my own company.

After being on call 24/7 for decades – kids, ageing parents, dogs – I found a beauty in stepping back and simply existing without someone needing you. It's like exhaling after holding your breath for far too long.

Pies rang. "Feeling better?" Funny – I'd forgotten the pneumonia. I raved about unencumbered solo time. She craves it too, having raised five kids while managing a national media career.

"My dream is to be by myself for two days," she said. "And I don't want to go to the south of France. Give me a roadie, a country pub, a book, an open fire and not having to talk to anyone else, and I'm as happy as a clam."



Pies' beach shack. KATE HALFPENNY

I've spoken to countless women who've come to cherish their time alone. They say what was initially thrust upon them – empty nesting, relationships breaking down – and felt like a yawning gap is now a canvas for new possibilities of what they want to do, rather than what they have to.

It's what I found when Chris and I rented a flat in Melbourne last year as a city bolthole. I was 56, and it was the first time in my life I'd had somewhere to go where there were no parents, siblings, husbands, babies, pets, plants.

It sounds dramatic, but without the constant hum of other people, I heard my own voice more clearly. Late last year I interviewed Dr Julie Hannan, a UK chartered psychologist and psychotherapist, for my book. Her own, *The Midlife Crisis Handbook*, has since been ranked number six in a list of the seven best midlife crisis books of all time.

“Solitude is so important,” Julie told me.

In her 50s, she values freedom, choice and autonomy. To honour those, before she married her second husband they negotiated they would do what's called “living apart together”, or LAT. It relates to couples in committed relationships who live separately.

Julie and her husband live close to each other and spend between three and five evenings a week together: “There's no one I'd rather spend time with. Other than myself.”

My delight in being alone doesn't stretch to trying LAT – yet – but the beach house stint proved the value of giving energy back to myself instead of others. I loved the silence, where I controlled the noise, the pace, the atmosphere.

In that quiet, I felt myself again. Not someone's wife, mother, employee, but a woman fully in control of her own narrative.

Kate Halfpenny is the founder of Bad Mother Media.

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