

## Alone in a Crowd

*Even in a group, I'm afraid of missing out*

Upasna Barath  
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Feelings of loneliness and exclusion follow me no matter where I go. I know this because I have never lived in any one place for longer than five years. Those feelings were there throughout elementary school, at the two different schools I attended in two different states. They were there during my middle school years in India, a country I had just moved to. They were there throughout high school, when I moved back to the U.S. (and yet again to a new town). They are here even in college, where *everyone* is the new kid. I have always had to make new friends. This meant joining unfamiliar friend groups, attempting to understand inside jokes, and trying to make plans with acquaintances on the regular. It is difficult being that person. It felt so awful hanging out with new friends but not really being *a part of them*. I would ask if I could join for dinner or at the movies, but once I was there I'd feel like I was outside my body, only watching what was going on. I felt so alone even when I was surrounded by people. I've also always had a problem with comparing myself to others. It's a way for me to figure out whether or not I am "normal" or "doing the right thing." I compare myself to people I look up to, especially—friends I

assume are living happy lives. People like my boyfriend, Kevin. He surrounds himself with fun, vibrant friends. Even when he's alone, he's seems OK with it. Observing him, it makes me anxious to think that *I'm* missing out on the good times—that I'm an outsider to all of the excitement and fun.

As you spend more time with people, you get closer to them. You begin to trust them,

understand them, and even identify with them. But the time I spend with people is sporadic. Recently, Kevin and I were hanging out on a Friday night and he asked me what I had done during the week and who I had hung out with. It

hurt me to say, "Well, just you, honestly. I've been too busy to see anyone else and all of my friends have been hanging out without me because we have different schedules."

There are so many things I need to do. When I have to set aside time to finish my homework, participate in extracurricular activities, or catch up on sleep, I am afraid I am missing out on bonding time—time that is bringing everyone closer together, while inadvertently pushing me away because of my absence. The question I've been asking myself is this: What's better—feeling alone by yourself, or within a group? When I am alone, I long to be



around others and develop close relationships. When I am with a group, I still manage to feel somewhat alone, and so *different*. Identifying what seems like an inability to be like everyone else, an inability to relate to people in the way they relate to each other, is so *isolating*.

I think the answer lies somewhere in how I feel about myself. It *is* possible to be comfortable by myself and to not worry about what everyone else is doing. Being alone is very different than feeling lonely. I want to build up the confidence to say, "This time is for me. I am the most important person in my life, and so I should be able to keep myself company." This is perfectly normal, and even moreover I don't want to depend on other people to make me happy. Being alone is a sign of strength.

I'm trying to embrace the times I feel alone and different and left out when I'm in a group. Though it can make me very lonely at times,

like I'm not really included, I want to really focus on how cool it is that I am different, and that we all are. There's a sense of independence in not understanding a group completely—when it seems everyone identifies themselves within the group, while you're just you. That you don't really get the jokes and you aren't really with everyone else all of the time because you are our own person; you do other things and spend time with others and spend time with ourselves. When I intentionally go to the movies, eat sushi, or even just walk over to a nearby park alone, I am proving myself wrong by doing things I always thought I could never do alone. That in itself makes me feel strong and comfortable in my own skin. The one permanent person in my life is me. I am important enough to not be lonely or isolated just because I'm not with other people. The world is mine to explore, and, if I want to, I can do it alone.