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Knowing How to Live Alone

"Alone one is never lonely," says the poet and author Mary Sarton in praise of living along. Most people, however, are terrified of living alone. They are used to living with others -- children with parents, roommates with roommates, friends with friends, husbands with wives. When the statistics catch up with them, therefore, they are rarely prepared. Chances are high that most adult men and women will need to know how to live along, briefly or longer, at some time in their lives. In the United States, circumstances often force people to live alone. For example, many high school and college graduates move away from their hometowns and continue their educations or take jobs.

Most schools assign roommates, but employers usually expect people to take care of their own living arrangements. Also, married people might feel they will always be together, but currently one out of two marriages ends in divorce. An even sadder statistic concerns the death of a spouse. Estimates are that in the next twenty years eight out of ten married women will become widows, usually late in life. These facts show that most people have to live by themselves at least once in their lives whether they want to or not.

One good way to prepare for living alone is to learn how to take care of practical matters. For example, some students and newly single people might not know how to do something as simple as opening a checking account. When making arrangements alone, they might be too tense to find out that they can compare banks as well as the benefits of various types of accounts. Similarly, making major purchases is something people living alone might have to handle. When divorced or widowed people were married, perhaps the other spouse

did the choosing or the couple make the decisions together. But how long can a person manage with a refrigerator that cannot be repaired or a car that will not run?

After shopping around and making price comparisons, most people find that these decisions are much less complicated than they seem at first. The confidence that single people get from learning to deal with practical matters can boost their chances for establishing new friendships. When singles feel self-reliant, they can have an easier time getting out and meeting new people. For instance, some students are in the habit of always going to classes with a friend. When they break this dependency, they can be pleasantly surprised to find that they can concentrate better on the course and also have a chance to make some new friends.

Likewise, the idea of going alone to the beach or to parties can paralyze some singles. Once they make the attempt, however, people alone usually find that almost everyone welcomes a new, friendly face. Probably the most difficult problem for people living alone is dealing with feelings of loneliness. First, they have to understand the feeling. Some people confuse being alone with feeling lonely. They need to remember that unhappily married people can feel very lonely with spouses, and anyone can suffer from loneliness in a room crowded with friends. Second, people living alone have to fight any tendencies to get depressed.

Depression can lead to much unhappiness, including compulsive behavior like overeating or spending too much money. Depression can also drive people to fill the feeling of emptiness by getting into relationships or jobs that they do not truly want. Third, people living alone need to get involved in useful and pleasurable activities, such as volunteering their services to help others. People need to ask themselves, "If I had to live alone starting tomorrow morning, would I know how?" If the answer is "No," they need to become conscious of what living alone calls for. People who face up to life usually do not have to hide from it later on.