

Bring Back the Third Place

The answer to loneliness might be to bring back the third place.

LONELINESS IS A LONGING FOR SOMETHING YOU DO NOT HAVE or that you miss and wish you had again. And unfortunately for many of us with ADHD, feeling lonely and wanting a friend or group of friends is common. As much as we know that social connection is good for our health and wellbeing, finding friends and keeping them in our lives isn't always easy.

I have spent a good part of my career looking for solutions to this challenge. The key, to me, is that the solutions need to be aligned with our neurology, be less taxing on our executive function skills, and help us to find friends and much-needed circles of support in a simple, easy way.

An often overlooked solution to the challenges of loneliness is to bring back the third place.

Historically in American life we have home, work, and then a “third place” where we gather and hang out. It could be a coffee shop, park, library, bar, bowling alley, sports club, bookstore, community or senior center, or a house of worship. Third places are really spaces in-between work and home where you can connect with another, often more social, part of yourself.

Changes in society have affected the use of social spaces, and this has had an impact on how lonely people feel. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg identified the concept of the third place in the late 1980s, when he spoke about the benefits of these so-called gathering spots that fit into the fabric of everyday life.

In most cases, these spots are conveniently nestled into your routine or everyday life. They could be as simple as the pub or coffee spot you stop by on your way home from work. Or a place where you share snacks and conversation with your neighbors or members of a sport team you play on a few times a month. The idea with the third place is that it's someplace where you interact, connect, and socialize with new as well as familiar people.

Why does this matter? For many people with ADHD, adding one more thing to the to-do list or one more new thing to their life may never happen. For some, it's because they avoid things that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable. For others, they may get distracted or forget if it's not on the schedule. Whatever the reason, having things that are planned seems to be better for almost everyone I meet.

And, as many of us try to be more proactive about our mental health, it's important to recognize that third places offer a sense of belonging in a world where so many neurodiverse people feel left out, neglected, or simply like they don't fit in.

Being connected to others produces oxytocin or the “love chemical” that is essential for social bonding to occur. When oxytocin is flowing, it helps people to feel trust, reassured and to read social cues better.

Yet, there is a paradox here: when you feel disconnected, that's when you will benefit the most from connecting with others.



Which is, of course, hard to do. Bringing back the third place might be the answer. Here are some tips for making third places work in your life.

Add interest to the recipe.

Interest is key to help ADHD brains feel engaged, stave off boredom, and ensure you're able to enjoy an activity. As you choose a third place to frequent, be sure to include "interest" in your personal recipe. What are you into or curious about, and where can your curiosity take you? Because here's the truth: without interest, it's hard to stay motivated. Interest is your fuel. Without it, it's hard to motivate yourself to visit this third place or to find enjoyment when you are there.

Pick a location that is part of your routine.

Returning to the same place every week can become more comfortable as you get into the routine. A third place where you can see familiar faces helps. I'm dating myself, but I remember the line from the theme song from the TV show *Cheers*, "where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came." Third places that take on this vibe for you are more likely to keep you motivated, and that's the fuel you need to keep going.

Look for emotional safety.

Spaces where you feel comfortable being yourself without masking or camouflaging are signs that you feel psychologically safe. This element is important, because when you don't feel psychologically safe, your body and mind are on high alert, and that makes it harder to interact with other people and have fun. Just remember, sometimes it takes trying out more than one third place to find your ideal spot.

Create a galaxy of support people in your life.

Finding one "perfect" person you can lean on can be difficult. It's wise to create a galaxy of connections to fill your friendship cup. Sometimes it helps to have a few third places you can frequent so you meet different people to fill different needs.

Leverage your surroundings.

Go to places you know to make it easier. Look back over the past five years of your life: what third places did you previously frequent that for whatever reason have fallen away? Consider bringing those back if they fit the other items listed above.

Finally, participate.

You won't benefit in the same way if you're a wallflower versus someone who strikes up a conversation with the person sitting next to you. Take the chance to make a little small talk with your neighbor, bowling buddy, pew mate, fellow volunteer, or teammate. This is how you make your third place count.

Whether you're troubled by loneliness or not, third places are a much needed respite for us all. Socializing is about more than just getting out of your comfort zone. On many levels it's also TLC for your life. 🧡



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ADDITIONAL READING

<https://theweek.com/culture-life/third-places-disappearing>

<https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/>


[third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture/](https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture/)

<https://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/what-to-know-about-oxytocin>

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