

How to be alone

When Felicity Aston went to Antarctica to ski the continent alone, her concerns were how to survive the cold and how to stay strong enough. What she didn't anticipate was the intense loneliness that would overcome her. **Nione Meakin** met her to find out how she coped



How much time are you comfortable spending by yourself? A day? A week? How about two months?

When I first read about Felicity Aston, who last year became the first person to ski Antarctica solo, I was impressed not only by her physical achievements, but also by her psychological fortitude. The idea of spending eight weeks without any human contact at all – as she did – seemed unthinkable to me.

But explorers must surely be made of sterner stuff, I reasoned. She undoubtedly had more pressing concerns as she

was trudging across one of the world's most inhospitable environments than a hankering for a pint with a friend.

I was wrong. In the end it wasn't the sub-zero temperatures that got to this seasoned adventurer – nor the incredible endurance that's needed to haul two sledges 1,744km from the Ross Ice Shelf to the Ronne Ice Shelf via the South Pole; it was the loneliness.

Because, of course, none of us is truly immune to the experience. Whether it stems from something as life-changing as a divorce or a bereavement, or as fleeting as a Friday night in alone on

the sofa, we have all experienced the discomfort of finding ourselves alone when we'd rather not be.

'It was quite overwhelming,' Aston tells me. 'I'd been travelling back and forth to Antarctica for years, and even lived there for a while. I was obsessed with the place and looking forward to having it all to myself. But the sense of shock I felt when the plane left never faded. Instead of enjoying the peace, I became completely fixated on how alone I was.'

Prior to the expedition, Aston had considered herself happy in her own company and had often made solo trips >>>

>>> through Europe. She knew the solitude of Antarctica would be a challenge, but that was part of the appeal. Then reality struck. 'It's not only that there isn't ready help – as there is in nearly every other place you might go – it's that there isn't any sign of humanity at all,' she explains. 'You are the only speck of life. There is something deeply unnerving about being so removed from the nearest person and from the support that gives you.'

Although it hardly comes close, I'm reminded of moving to the city I now live in – where, in the beginning, I didn't know a soul. I could call friends, but that was as far as it went. If I wanted to go to the pub, or the cinema, I was on my own. When I locked myself out, or if the car broke down, I had no help to fix things. It was hard work and, as Aston explains, the pressure quickly starts to take its toll. 'Getting out of my tent every day became the toughest thing in the world. I'd sit there in the morning listening to the wind, trying to work myself up to stepping outside. It's surprisingly hard to keep going when there's no one around to spur you on or tell you you're being silly.'

Cold comforts

In talks she has given to the public about the expedition, the theme of perseverance is what most people want to talk about afterwards. A woman suffering with depression drew parallels between Aston's attempts to get out of her tent each day and her own struggle stepping outside her front door, while a cello soloist likened it to the way she felt standing in the wings before a performance.

'She described it as the loneliest place in the world because no one can help you – you have to get out there and play your instrument,' says Aston. 'It was strangely comforting to know that it wasn't just me. Whatever the situation, loneliness has the potential to derail us all.'

How, then, do we stop it getting to that point? For Aston, the solution lay in a



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number of techniques. The first was resilient thinking – making sure that one's thought process is objective rather than emotional. 'I'd sometimes wake up and not want to get out of my sleeping bag. Then I'd beat myself up about the half-hour lie-in I'd given myself, which would lead to thinking that I wasn't doing very well, getting depressed and not pushing myself as hard as I should. I learned to stop and use resilient thinking to ask myself what I was feeling, instead of haranguing myself,' she says.

Another useful technique was something she dubbed 'mental hygiene', a daily clean-up of negative/unhelpful thoughts.

'On an expedition, everything is ruled by routine, from the time you get up to what you eat to when you go to bed. But that doesn't take your mental state into account. So I made a point of running through how I was feeling each morning, identifying things that might be an issue and dealing with them there and then.'

At first Aston focused only on the end result – reaching her destination. But it was the small steps on the way that proved more significant. 'I actually found it was better not to look too far ahead – it was more beneficial to celebrate what I'd achieved than think about what was to come,' she admits. 'It might not have been quite as slick or heroic as I'd have liked, but I would concentrate on the fact that I'd done it and therefore could do it again the next day.'

Aston completed the expedition; I made new friends. Neither of us is keen to repeat our experiences any time soon. Yet there are benefits. 'You can't conquer loneliness but going through something like this gives you the confidence that you can at least manage it,' she says. 'Since the trip, I've noticed a quiet assurance in myself that comes from knowing I can cope on my own if I have to.'

I know exactly what she means. ■

'Alone In Antarctica' by Felicity Aston is published by Summersdale, £8.99

EMBRACING SOLITUDE

How to be alone without being lonely

■ THINK SMALL

Looking too far ahead is daunting. Celebrate minor achievements – going to a café on your own, talking to someone at work – rather than fixating on what you've yet to achieve.

■ ASK QUESTIONS

Don't let your thoughts go unchecked. It's easy to

let a negative emotion dictate your mood.

Question what's caused you to feel the way you do and consider whether it's justified.

■ CLEAN HOUSE

Practise 'mental hygiene'. Take a few minutes every morning for a bit of psychological housework. Are there worries or

doubts lurking? Deal with them before you get on with your day.

■ ACCEPT IT

Remember that loneliness isn't a failing. We're social creatures hard-wired to be with others and it's natural to feel unhappy when that's jeopardised. Don't feel ashamed to admit to it.