

UNITED WISDOM

Why silence can feel uncomfortable

The Person and the Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“Sometimes quiet means disquiet.”*

Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius, 56.8; Richard M. Gummere's English translation, 1917–1925. The letter.

What this article is about

Imagine an ordinary evening: you switch off a talk programme you were barely listening to, and the room suddenly feels uncomfortable. The refrigerator is running and cars pass outside, but the sense of someone being there has disappeared. Your hand is already searching for another recording. This hypothetical episode invites a ready-made explanation: you are afraid to face yourself. Yet that sentence has already supplied both a cause and someone to blame. So far, we know only that losing the familiar background sound felt unpleasant.

Silence can mean an absence of sound, an interruption in conversation, freedom from demands, or waiting with nothing to fill the time. Each calls for a different question. We will examine these distinctions, compare a Stoic argument with Pascal's Christian account of diversion, and consider a disagreement over a psychological study. The practical result is modest but meaningful: a more accurate description of your experience and a choice about the evening's conditions, without making it a test of inner maturity.

I. Switching off a programme does not empty the room

Uncomfortable silence begins with a particular change. In our example, speech stopped. Light, temperature, household sounds, and the possibility of calling someone remain. The word silence has gathered several circumstances into one image, and that image is already suggesting an explanation. If the room has become empty, it seems to need filling immediately. But switching off the programme has not changed how many people you have relationships with. It has changed the background available at this moment.

We can ask what, exactly, became harder. Is there an uncomfortable bodily sensation? Did a particular thought arise? Did you lose a marker of time? Can you now hear equipment that the presenter's voice had covered? The answers need not match. One person might describe boredom, another wariness, and another missing a familiar shared dinner. These are different accounts even if everyone turns a screen on again. The same action does not establish the

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same internal task. Assigning a single motive to everyone can hide a circumstance we could actually check.

Imagine another version: you switched off the programme while waiting to hear about a loved one's journey. The room feels uncomfortable because the time before their reply has become more noticeable. In a third version, after a day of negotiations, the recorded voice allowed you to remain a listener without making decisions. Now you have to choose something to do. The difficulty concerns a transition between activities. In a fourth version, you simply enjoy music during dinner. Missing a favourite accompaniment does not make a preference a personality problem. It helps first to establish which evening we are describing.

The description can be brief: after switching off the programme, I noticed myself checking messages again. That offers more information than a claim about fearing inner emptiness. It leaves room for another question and does not require agreement with someone else's elegant explanation. Nor does it dismiss the experience. The room may indeed feel unwelcoming. Accuracy helps give that discomfort an appropriate address: the physical environment, anticipation of contact, the content of a thought, or the absence of a chosen activity. Each address allows a different response.

II. Sound, meaning, and presence

A talk programme provides more than an acoustic background. It offers a sequence, a tone of voice, and a sense of an ongoing conversation. Music, rainfall sounds, and human speech may occupy the same slot in a schedule while doing different jobs. If you want a familiar voice, replacing it with ventilation will not necessarily improve the evening. If a sharp street noise is bothering you, a friendly presenter may not solve the problem either. It helps to distinguish what makes sound, what conveys meaning, and what reminds us that other people exist.

Consider a hypothetical example: someone plays an old podcast whose content they know well. They do not need new information. They prepare food and occasionally notice the speakers' tone. A recording containing unexpected news would demand attention and could feel tiring. Here, the familiar background may be connected to predictability. This is a reasonable working interpretation for this evening, rather than a statement about the brain or a hidden dependency. If desired and appropriate, it could be explored by comparing a familiar recording, chosen music, and a conversation with another person.

That comparison creates no obligation to learn to manage without them all. If light makes reading easier, we do not treat a lamp as evidence of an inability to read independently. Audio accompaniment can also be part of an environment. A meaningful question arises when the habitual option conflicts with your goal: you meant to rest but started following another argument; you meant to talk to someone close but spent dinner listening to someone else's

conversation. Then there is a specific mismatch to discuss. The mere presence of a recording establishes none of that.

The boundary between accompaniment and activity can move. Having started with something in the background, you might become interested and postpone cooking. This is not necessarily a mistake; plans can change. But if you missed the transition, the evening may later be difficult to describe: you seemed to rest, seemed to learn a great deal, yet the promised conversation never happened. Distinguishing sound from meaning brings the account back to the actual sequence. What did I play, why, when did my attention shift, and what do I now want to continue? That question does not require a verdict on character.

III. Several reasons for an uncomfortable evening

One word can conceal discomfort at different scales. At the environmental scale, there may be unfamiliar noise, lighting, or no suitable place to sit. At the scale of an episode, there may be a reply you are waiting for, unfinished work, or the memory of a conversation. At the scale of a life situation, the household may have changed, or your schedule may no longer offer the contact you want. These scales can interact, but separating them helps. A new lamp may improve an evening; it does not answer a question about lost closeness. A conversation may help; it does not repair faulty ventilation.

Imagine someone living alone for the first time after moving home. Footsteps used to announce another person's return, and a cupboard door marked the beginning of dinner. Those events no longer happen. They might miss people, a predictable routine, or the ability not to organise everything themselves. We cannot choose one explanation on their behalf. Even when a change is obvious, the experience needs its own description. Perhaps they like independence while also missing an evening conversation. Both can comfortably belong to the same account.

Another person lives with family but is alone in a room after an unpleasant argument. Here, silence may feel like a continuation of the relationship: the other person has left, but the question remains. Playing a film allows attention to turn elsewhere for a while. That action alone does not tell us whether they are avoiding a necessary conversation or taking a reasonable break. Agreements, timing, and consequences matter. If the conversation is arranged for tomorrow, evening rest need not count as avoidance. If the other person expects an answer now, that is a separate fact worth establishing.

Possible causes can be checked in order of accessibility. Start with what can be described without interpretation: when the discomfort began, what changed, what you are doing, and whom or what you are waiting for. Then consider explanations, including simple ones. Not every habit contains a secret conflict; not every feeling has one cause. Several possibilities

can remain open while you choose a household action. That is proportionate thinking. An evening does not have to become a study of an entire biography before it can become a little clearer and more comfortable.

IV. When an absence of speech becomes a statement about a relationship

Silence between people differs from silence in an empty room. After a question, a pause might mean reflection, having no answer, not wanting to continue, or simply not having heard. Its meaning is not written into the pause itself. Yet someone in the conversation may already experience it as a relationship event: I have been rejected, judged, or denied contact. That interpretation may be correct, but checking it requires information about this person and this situation. The length of a pause does not reveal a motive automatically.

Imagine a family dinner after a working day. One person wants to describe a meeting; the other is still finishing an email. A few seconds of silence feel like indifference. One possible task is to agree on timing: can you listen now, or shall we return to this after the email? The question does not guarantee a kind answer. It merely offers a way to distinguish temporary unavailability from a refusal of contact. If there is still no answer, uncertainty remains. It does not need to be filled with the most reassuring explanation.

The reverse can happen too: someone sustains a conversation so they do not have to decide whether they want to continue. The uncomfortable possibility is being without an established role. While someone is talking, they can be the listener, the adviser, or the person who asks the next question. A pause presents a choice. Yet this explanation is not universal either. Someone may simply regard silence as impolite because that is customary in their family. A conversational preference deserves discussion before psychological decoding. Both people can understand comfortable closeness differently.

A small agreement about pauses can help. You might say that after a demanding day you would like to sit together without talking for a while; or that a long, unexplained interruption is worrying, and you would like to know when the conversation will resume. Such an agreement requires actual consent and can be revised. It does not turn silence into an obligatory practice. If a pause is used as punishment, calling it silence does not remove its consequences. We distinguish chosen silence together from unavailable contact, without awarding either a status in advance.

V. A Stoic distinction and its limits

In Letter56, sections1–8, Seneca distinguishes physical stillness from tranquillity. This is a moral and philosophical argument. Our narrow question is whether removing sound removes a concern. The letter does not establish the cause of a particular reader's experience.

Suppose someone awaits a difficult decision at work. They close the windows, switch off notifications, and clear the table. External demands decrease, but tomorrow's conversation remains unresolved. The distinction has a practical meaning: the environment has changed; the situation has not yet changed. A comfortable room may make rest easier, but it should not be expected to abolish uncertainty. If that is what we expected silence to do, disappointment also concerns a promise we quietly assigned to it. We can revise that promise without giving up comfortable conditions.

This reading demands no Stoic heroism. A reader need not endure noise to test their moral strength. The philosophical question does not establish that every obstruction can be overcome through will alone. A particular home may contain real inconveniences and constraints that are better changed. Our task is to understand their relationship to the experience. Moving to another room is one available response to the environment. Clarifying an agreement is a response to the situation. Neither response diminishes the dignity of the other.

Otherwise, a philosophical sentence becomes another source of pressure. Someone wanted a peaceful dinner and is now expected to demonstrate that external circumstances have no power over them. That examination comes from our way of reading, rather than from the refrigerator or the conversation. We can respect a historical text, identify a useful distinction, and disagree with a stronger demand. Comparing traditions then remains a conversation with a source. It offers a question to consider without attributing a modern promise of wellbeing to an ancient author or enrolling the reader as their pupil without a choice.

VI. Pascal: diversion as a larger question

In Pensées, fragment139, Pascal connects diversion with human mortality. His Christian philosophical question exceeds our evening. It cannot be equated with Stoic inner order: these are different frameworks, neither of which diagnoses a habit of listening to a programme.

Yet the larger question may matter to a reader. Sometimes switching off a recording brings back a thought that is indeed difficult to keep in view: life has changed, someone close is far away, or an old routine has ended. In such a scene, diversion offers temporary relief. Whether to continue thinking today depends on resources, wishes, and circumstances. The seriousness of a subject does not itself set the time for confronting it. A meaningful question can be

acknowledged and postponed. Reflection remains a voluntary action rather than a debt owed to silence.

A problem appears if habitual switching conflicts with a chosen direction. Someone intended to discuss how to organise a new life, but fills every free evening with recordings and later notices that the conversation again did not happen. Specific information is now available: an intention, repetition, and consequences. It can help them decide whether to arrange a meeting, write down a question, or involve a conversation partner. We still do not know whether the pattern comes from fear, tiredness, lacking a suitable person, or a task that is too broad. Observation should not close the competing explanations in advance.

Respect for Pascal does not require extending his account to every form of entertainment. Games, music, and company can be chosen parts of a good life. To call them avoidance, we need to show what question is being avoided, in which episode, and according to whose intention. Otherwise, we get a convenient, unfalsifiable theory: every interest demonstrates flight, and every objection confirms it. Such a theory offers poor orientation. For this article, the larger philosophical question retains its value alongside its limit: it invites consideration of our relationship to mortality without explaining every screen we switch on.

VII. An experiment does not measure an entire inner life

Wilson and colleagues' 2014 author abstract reports difficulty with brief periods without usual external activities. We read the abstract, not the full paper. The task establishes no general inability to tolerate silence. A home evening with a chosen activity differs from a laboratory instruction.

Conditions matter even at the level of basic reasoning. In one scene, someone chooses to sit by a window; in another, they agree to undertake an unfamiliar task. In one, they can get up, make tea, and return; in another, behaviour may be governed by instructions. In one, a conversation partner is expected; in another, a researcher organises the experience. We make no claim about which difference has a greater effect. That would require relevant data. The comparison nevertheless shows why an appealing headline about human nature needs care.

A rating of enjoyment also answers only some possible questions. An activity can matter while feeling uncomfortable. Someone might prefer a walk to reading a difficult book without judging the book harmful or pointless. Assessing a particular practice requires a criterion: enjoyment, task completion, subsequent understanding, or something else. Changing the criterion changes the conclusion. If someone expected a pleasant state but encountered an important memory, the evening cannot automatically be labelled either successful or unsuccessful. We need to return to what they wanted from that pause.

For our episode, the study gives us reason to avoid a hasty moral judgement. Finding a brief task unpleasant does not mean a participant is superficial; enjoying it does not establish depth. A statistical account of a group also does not reveal the cause of one person's experience. A reader may recognise something in the setup and then examine their own conditions. That transition needs care: recognising yourself in an account is one action; establishing an explanation of your evening is another. A scientific reference makes a question inspectable when its limits remain visible beside it.

VIII. What scientific disagreement changes

Fox and colleagues, 2014, dispute a broad interpretation and emphasise variation. Selected arguments and the conclusion were read; this is a commentary, not a new experiment. A general claim about thinking's unpleasantness remains contested. The opposite promise that silence benefits everyone is not established either.

Scientific disagreement complicates simple advice. We would like one sentence to explain the evening and identify the right action. Instead, distinctions need to remain: whose experiences were measured, what they were asked to do, how a scale was understood, and how far a conclusion can extend. These questions do not make the study useless. They specify what it addresses. When a source enters personal reflection, this is its job: to add an inspectable distinction rather than relieve us of describing our circumstances.

Imagine two friends discussing silence. One enjoys reading without music; the other rests more comfortably with it. After seeing a popular headline, they might decide that the first is deeper and the second avoids themselves. After encountering the disagreement, a more accurate conversation is possible: what does each do, what do they get from it, and what gets in the way? Neither needs statistics to defend their human dignity. Their preferences remain different. If one has a difficulty, it can be discussed separately from a competition over the correct way to spend a free evening.

There is an editorial consequence too: the experiment should not be presented as modern confirmation of Pascal or Seneca. A philosophical argument and a brief psychological task have different subjects and methods of verification. They can meet around a question about diversion, but that meeting does not establish agreement. Keeping the limit produces a richer picture. A historical text raises a broad question, an experiment sets particular conditions, a commentary tests the strength of an interpretation, and a reader describes an episode. None of these participants has to replace all the others.

IX. The right to choose accompaniment

Silence has no right to demand endurance. You can play music, go for a walk, invite someone, or simply end the evening. The choice becomes more meaningful when its purpose is known. If you want company, consider available contact. If you want a familiar rhythm, choose a recording. If an email needs attention, set aside a separate time. These options are not a programme for improving a psychological condition. They are actions corresponding to different accounts of one room, and they allow for no immediate decision.

It also helps to notice an option's cost. A live conversation requires another person's availability and consent. A recording can delay bedtime if each instalment automatically starts the next. A walk depends on local conditions and physical possibilities. Postponing a question leaves it for the future. No option is free in time and attention, but its cost can be chosen consciously. Comparison helps us avoid demanding everything from one action: music need not provide reciprocal contact, and an evening call need not resolve life's uncertainty.

Sometimes you may want to explore whether the discomfort concerns familiar silence or having no activity. If a small trial suits you, choose an ordinary, brief episode with a clear focus: dinner without a talk recording, or a few minutes by the window with tea. A predetermined duration does not demonstrate benefit. The ability to stop and note what actually happened matters more. This is an editorial suggestion for observation rather than a tested treatment. If you do not want to try it, the distinction between possible causes remains available; declining does not establish a lack of courage.

A separate limit concerns significant or continuing distress. An ordinary household choice should not become a self-administered endurance test or an interpretation of every symptom. An article about silence reaches its boundary here: it can help frame a question, but cannot establish the origin of a condition. You can stop the trial and discuss the experience with an appropriate professional; medical decisions require separate assessment. NCCIH advises against replacing ordinary care with contemplative practices or postponing care. Our household example is not a treatment; that boundary applies to it too.

X. Return to the same room with a different question

By the end of our hypothetical evening, the setting may have barely changed. The refrigerator still runs, the screen is off, and a cup sits on the table. The question has changed. Instead of asking whether you are deep enough for silence, you can ask what disappeared with the programme: an activity, a familiar voice, a sense of time, or freedom from choosing? The question does not guarantee immediate clarity. It makes the description more accurate and gives an answer a particular place in life.

Suppose you discover that you miss sharing dinner. Discussing possible meetings matters more than training yourself to tolerate a switched-off screen. If you need accompaniment for cooking, you can choose it. If a postponed question returns, you can write it down and decide when to revisit it. If you notice an unpleasant equipment noise, that concerns the environment. These possibilities are not steps on a maturity ladder. Matching a response to circumstances is more interesting than trying to produce the same state under every possible condition.

You may find no explanation. An honest note can then say: after switching off the recording, I felt uncomfortable; I do not yet know why; tonight I chose music. It contains an event, an unknown, and a decision. It does not promise that the choice is best, but allows later comparison of consequences. Perhaps the evening felt easier; perhaps the wish for conversation remained. Preserved uncertainty does not prevent action at an available scale. It prevents us from pretending to know ourselves conclusively where that knowledge is still missing.

The Marcus Aurelius passage below can be read as an invitation to inner composure. Readers retain the freedom to understand a good evening differently. Philosophical discipline, religious reflection, a research task, and a household habit meet in this article without merging into a common command. That is the point we arrive at: uncomfortable silence deserves attention, but explaining it begins with distinctions. When a name ceases to be a verdict, the room becomes a place where you can choose sound, conversation, thought, or the ordinary ending of a day.

What this means in practice

If you want to examine one episode, you can first record its conditions. For example: at nine I switched off a programme; a minute later I searched for another; I was awaiting news of a journey; dinner was not yet prepared. Separately name the accessible experience: boredom, discomfort, anxiety, or difficulty saying. You choose the word. Then note possible explanations and what remains unknown. Waiting for a reply is an established circumstance; wanting a live conversation is a possibility until you recognise it in your own experience.

Next, choose one task for tonight. Do you want to eat, wait for information, arrange a conversation, rest, or consider a question? Everything need not become one project. If you choose background sound, you can name its purpose and later notice whether it retained that function. If you choose contact, an actual agreement with another person is needed. If you choose rest, you do not also have to take self-examination to a final conclusion. A manageable scale remains part of a good decision.

Assess a brief voluntary trial by what happened, rather than an ideal of proper silence. What became easier? What remained difficult? Did you have to force yourself to continue? The

answer may be mixed. Keep it without making a general claim about character. Conditions will differ next time, and the note can offer information for comparison rather than a rule for every evening. If a trial intensifies distress, stopping is allowed; health questions require suitable support, separately from this editorial framework.

You can also write nothing down. The article offers a distinction you can bring into conversation or leave here. The person in our opening scene is entitled to play the familiar programme again. It can now be a chosen accompaniment to dinner rather than evidence of an inability to tolerate themselves. Perhaps they will call someone later. Perhaps they will simply eat and go to bed. Ending an evening normally is also an action. It does not need to present itself as a spiritual achievement.

Key quotation

> *“Wind up thyself into thyself.”*

Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, VII.20 in Meric Casaubon's English translation. Project Gutenberg, Book VII. This is a Stoic invitation to composure; it promises no medical effect and requires no withdrawal regardless of circumstances.

Connections between traditions

• Seneca ↔ ordinary observation: bodily stillness and experience differ; moral philosophy does not identify the cause of a particular condition.

• Stoic argument ↔ Pascal: both address our relationship to thought; inner order and the Christian question of mortality retain their difference.

• Wilson ↔ Fox: a research setup and a critique of its broad interpretation; the commentary is not a separate experiment.

• Philosophical question ↔ scientific assessment: related subjects allow different methods; laboratory conditions do not verify a metaphysical position.

• Silence together ↔ a private evening: an absence of speech may call for an agreement between people or a choice of environment; this is an editorial distinction rather than one tradition's doctrine.

Sources

1. Seneca, Letter 56, sections 1–8, 1917–1925, Richard M. Gummere translation. Selected passage read; translation details checked against The Stoic Library edition. Not a complete reading of the collected letters.

2. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Project Gutenberg no. 2680. Casaubon translation; VII.20 and the editorial note on the 1634/1635 versions read. Not a complete reading of the book.

3. Pascal, Pensées, fragment 139, Project Gutenberg no. 18269. Selected paragraphs on diversion; this electronic text names a Dutton 1958 print edition. The translator's identity was not established in the metadata read. Paraphrase only, with no direct quotation.

4. Wilson et al., 2014, Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind, DOI 10.1126/science.1250830. Publisher abstract read; the full paper and original data were not checked.

5. Fox et al., 2014, Is thinking really aversive?, DOI 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01427. Selected sections of the critical argument and conclusion read; a commentary rather than a new experiment.

6. NCCIH, Meditation and Mindfulness: Effectiveness and Safety. Definitions, safety section, and recommendations read; page updated June 2022, access checked 6 October 2026. Used for the boundary regarding medical care, without applying meditation's effectiveness to our household example.

Tags

silence, quiet, background sound, speech, presence, evening, solitude, conversation, waiting, uncertainty, boredom, environment, habit, attention, thoughts, diversion, Seneca, Stoicism, Marcus Aurelius, Pascal, mortality, philosophy, psychological research, scientific disagreement, interpretation, choice, journal, personal observation, limits of inference, freedom

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