

# Sound of silence

*Peace and quiet offers sanctity, stillness and respite. Put down your device, step out of the room and come with us to discover the splendid secrets of silence.*

Words Kyra Xavia

*Something  
special is waiting to be  
discovered and savoured.*

It's always in the background but invisible and often drowned out. Librarians and students know its value, as do creative folk and masters of mindfulness. Although many introverts crave it, even the most stimulis-seeking extrovert needs it too. Now increasingly hard to come by, silence has become a precious asset – and for valid reasons. Much more than an absence of noise, or a void that needs to be filled, silence bestows on humans a revered and sought-after state. With outer quietude, inner chatter subsides. There's an opportunity to feel wonderment in this space that we lose when our senses are cluttered with activity and sound, and through fine-tuning our attention, we can open up and expand consciousness. For centuries, advocates of tranquillity have known it's a source of spirituality, a wellspring of vitality, a font of creativity and a necessary element in healing. Not only does it help us deal with life's challenges more effectively, it facilitates recovery from blows. But it's only been in recent years that we've come to understand some of the secrets of silence, including how it makes our mind more interactive and improves cognitive function. >

Research reveals that when we're undistracted by external stimuli and goal-focused tasks, our brain responds in a fascinating way. We enter a condition of relaxation where our stream of consciousness wanders, daydreams, imagines and meditates. (Yes, daydreaming is now recognised as an essential experience.) Science calls this mysterious and complex resting state the 'default mode network' (DMN), which is when we have all-important, self-generated cognition – our key to learning, insight and wisdom.

Quite simply, silence helps us tune into our own super channel of awareness where we reflect, query, and access answers and novel solutions. Through introspection we affirm our identity, boundaries, values and morals, develop an improved understanding of human nature and others, and through this become healthier beings.

Not only that, quietness is crucial for a stage of creativity called incubation, where our ideas merge and mingle to manifest those eureka moments and epiphanies we love so much.

Yes, silence is golden because this is where our ideas flow, inspiration strikes and contentment can be felt.

Quiet gives us the freedom to scan our environment more closely too, and pay attention to what truly matters – not what demands our attention and feels most urgent because the ruckus can't be ignored.

It's therefore no surprise that despite our noisy ways, work, play and rest are all enhanced by quietude. Best of all, every one of us can benefit and it doesn't take much – as little as five minutes of deliberate silence a day can positively enhance our lives.

This is helpful to know because noise is one of the most pervasive pollutants of our times. The din of mechanisation, the drone of traffic and the constant interruptions of technology make our brains behave differently and in a negative way.

A busy, distracted lifestyle with a loud soundscape keeps us in a state of stress, splashing around in the shallow end of the mind pool, so to speak, meaning we miss out on realising our greater potential.

Without enough quiet in our lives we suffer, and for many urbanites serenity has become so elusive and yearned for, it's become necessary to buy earplugs and invest in noise-cancelling headphones, various snooze aids, white noise machines, digital detoxes, week-long silent meditation courses and sessions in sensory deprivation tanks, just to be reminded of what it feels like and to try and restore some equilibrium.

We know a peaceful life is less taxing on our reserves, so tends to make us look and feel younger, provides more energy, and can increase comfort, whereas constant noise is hard on health.

To counter the discord in towns and cities, various companies are developing ways to reduce its impact, just as more public spaces are being designed to serve as an aural oasis. Hospitals now incorporate

soundproofing and acoustic technology to help patients' sleep, which speeds recuperation. (The good thing about noise pollution is that it doesn't linger in the environment once the source is dealt with and innovations can help. For instance, the noise-reduction coating for wind turbines inspired by owl wings.)

Hectic days and social nights mean we need extra downtime to replenish, and our brains appear to recharge in silence more than they do during slumber – which shows just how valuable quiet, and time spent close to nature, can be – and no wonder.

Silence gives us a welcome and rejuvenating reprieve like fresh air, a warm shower and deep sleep. Most importantly, it invites us to explore the still and deep waters within which treasure can be found. For some, this means 'big picture' stuff, such as connecting with one's divine nature and feeling a sense of clarity and belonging. For others, it's like a reset button, better equipping them to navigate life and be at their sparkling best.

Physically, silence has a peculiar power to calm the body. It's been shown to lower blood pressure, reduce stress hormones, alleviate pain, boost immunity, protect the heart and more. Mentally, the therapeutic effects of quietness can lift mood and increase attention, focus, creativity and productivity, all of which can greatly improve our quality of life.

Some shush can also heighten our listening ability so we pick up on subtle nuances and hear the strum of our own heart and its desires more clearly. (During a lull, music, birdsong, a child's laughter and a loved one's voice can resonate powerfully.)

Furthermore, a 2013 study on mice determined that two hours of silence per day prompted cell development in the hippocampus, the brain region linked to the formation of memory, emotion and learning via the senses. While preliminary, the findings suggest therapeutic possibilities for disorders associated with decreased rates of neuron regeneration in the hippocampus such as depression and Alzheimer's. If similar links between silence and the development of nervous tissue can be found in humans, beneficial applications could be conceived. Imagine if brain cell regeneration just required silence?

As with darkness and starry skies, silence (and the peace of mind it instils) is now considered a resource in short supply and great demand, so it needs to be respected, protected and promoted.

A visionary team here in New Zealand is doing just that, providing serenity seekers optimal closeness to nature with full immersion into silence and stillness, in an intriguing and memorable way. (Learn more with our mini-break feature about [purepods.com](http://purepods.com) on page 72.)

Often unheard and disregarded, gentle hush is just as important as exercise, nourishing food and rest. Ensuring some peace and quiet every day is a healthy habit to cultivate – one that our body, brain and spirit will thank us for. **g**

*"The quieter  
you become,  
the more you  
can hear."*

Ram Dass

### Golden tips

- **Start** and end your day in silence and see what a difference it makes.
- **Seek** the quietest places you can and return to them often.
- **Foster** appreciation for still, quiet moments and enjoy the "aha" moments that occur.
- **Invite** in stillness and silence through meditation.
- **Disconnect** from the internet, turn off the TV, put down your smartphone, take off your headphones and dive into your own inner sea of tranquility.