

Repackaging Loneliness

By Ruth Ostrow

THE other day I caught myself thinking about babies. Let me get this straight. I have no desire to have another child. I'm very happy with the one I have, and delighted to be finally getting a little freedom from the shackles of her early childhood.

But there I was – on the threshold of enrolling my daughter in senior school – reminiscing about the feel of tiny hands clutching at my skin, the gurgles and yelps of a constantly hungry mouth.

While having a general check-up later that week with my doctor, I happened to mention this worrying urge and asked if there was any rogue hormone that could be playing tricks on my psyche. His answer was fascinating and worthy of sharing.

"Women don't seem to be able to cope with the notion of being alone," he said. "What men call 'solitude', women call 'loneliness'. While we males yearn for a time of peace without the needy co-dependencies of wives, children and friends, my female patients seem to always be looking for something or someone who'll latch on to the proverbial breast and fill their lives with meaning. The more demanding, the better."

I found his observations interesting, and possibly correct. I know many women who, faced with a bad relationship or nothing, will always take the challenging relationship. After all, bad relationships create even more relationships. The man cheats or does something unacceptable – drinks too much, gambles. The woman then gets on the phone to her girlfriends, who rush over and, with tongues wagging, make a strategy for how to deal with this "dreadful" situation.

"Pass the tea and sympathy," Janis Ian once sang of women colluding. When the man returns home there are tears, long talks, make-up sex, maybe a child conceived to fill the void. It's an endless cycle of emotion that strangely satiates the woman's need for intimacy even in its sadness. Given a similar prospect, most men I know would rather eat a tarantula.

"Isn't it the great cacophony of life, love, and those sticky, needy hands, that makes the feminine world go around?" jokes my doctor. We agree that women are oxytocin (the cuddle chemical) junkies, hard-wired against loneliness as nature's plan to keep us procreating or nagging our kids for grandkids to keep the species alive.

Laughter aside, I'm taking my doctors' orders on this one – repackaging loneliness as solitude and learning to enjoy the sweet serenity of my own company.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 12 AUG 2006