The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind
Recent research by Wilson, Reinhard, Westgate, Gilbert, Ellerbeck, Hahn, Brown, & Shaked (2014) suggests that the mind makes for a less-than-optimal stimulus. Without other people or distractions, individuals report spending time “just thinking” as a relatively aversive experience. There are two aspects of this study worth exploring in greater detail:

1. The Potential Role of Motivation
All participants in Wilson et al.’s (2014) research were forced to spend time alone. A large body of research shows that behaviors that are volitionally chosen – as opposed to enacted by force or perceived control – have positive effects on well-being in a variety of domains (see Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Hypothesis 1: Choosing to be alone should be more valuable than being forced to be alone or not having a choice.

2. Defining Well-Being
Researchers have begun broadening definitions of well-being to include eudaemonic forms, beyond pleasure and pain. Personal authenticity is defined as well-being from feeling that one is “in alignment with your true, genuine self” (Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013). When people feel free to consider their most important and self-relevant goals, to make plans without external input, and to think freely, personal authenticity is likely to arise.

Hypothesis 2: Choosing to be alone should increase authenticity relative to being forced or to not having a choice.

Study 1: Recalling Chosen (vs. Not) Time Alone
n = 87 undergraduates (51.7% male; ages 18-34, 57.5% single)
- All participants asked to recall a time they spent alone.
- Randomly assigned to 1 of 2 conditions:
  - Choice condition: “Think about a time you chose to do something alone.”
  - No choice condition: “Think about a time you did something alone, but not necessarily by choice.”

Study 1 Outcome Measures
- Happiness with the experience (3 items, 1-5 scale, alpha = .89)
- Authenticity during the experience (5 items, 1-7 scale, alpha = .83)
- Motivations for experiential buying (Zhang, Howell, & Caprariello, 2013)
  - Autonomously motivated (10 items, 1-7 scale, alpha = .89)
  - Controlled motivation (6 items, 1-7 scale, alpha = .86)

Study 2: Directly Extending the “Thinking Alone” Paradigm
n = 74 undergraduates (48.6% male; ages 18-31, 51.4% single)
- All participants came to the lab alone, and were told that they would be seated alone for an unspecified amount of time, between 10-15 minutes.
- Randomly assigned to 1 of 3 conditions, in a yoked design:
  - Choice condition
  - No choice condition
  - Pressure condition

Study 2 Outcome Measures
- Happiness (PANAS, 6 items, 1-5 scale, alpha = .88)
- Authenticity (4 items, 1-7 scale, alpha = .91)
- Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (Ryan, 1982)
  - Interest/Enjoyment (7 items, 1-7 scale, alpha = .90)

Study 2, cont...
- Before sitting alone, subjects in the Choice condition viewed:
  - “Choose which experience interests you the most:
    A: Focus on your body
    B: Focus on your mind
    C: Focus on your thoughts
    D: Focus on your feelings”
  - Before sitting alone, subjects in the No Choice condition:
    Did not view the list of options. They were merely told to spend the time doing whatever was selected by a P from the choice condition
  - Before sitting alone, subjects in the Pressure condition:
    Viewed the list of options, made a choice, but were then denied.
    They were told to spend the time in the same way as above.

Conclusion
We reliably found that autonomously motivated solitude promotes well-being, particularly in the form of personal authenticity.