

# How to live on Planet Introvert

## Who are these introverts anyway?

About 25% of the population are introverts. This is a minority, but a significant one, especially since there seems to be a greater concentration of introverts amongst intellectually gifted people. Myers Briggs defines introversion in terms of the source of energy which a person draws on in order to function in the world. Introverts get their energy from within. Extroverts need external stimulation (a bit like lizards in the sun).

## Preference

Jung says that we all prefer to behave as introverts or extroverts – one or the other. We are born with this preference, and it remains with us throughout our lives. However, this does not mean we cannot behave in other ways. For example many introverts, especially those who have feeling as a preference as well, can be very social people. They just find socialising extremely draining and need to recharge before and afterwards.

## Good or bad?

Scientific studies have shown that introverts have more activity in the frontal lobes of the brain and anterior, or front, thalamus. These areas are activated when a person's brain takes on internal processing such as remembering, problem solving and planning. Extroverts exhibit more activity in the anterior cingulate gyrus, temporal lobes and posterior thalamus. These areas are typically thought to be more involved in sensory processing such as listening, watching or driving.

This means that this part of a person's personality is not related to experience. It's just that we are wired up differently depending on our introvert or extrovert preference. So it cannot be good or bad to be an introvert. Despite this, of course, society does put pressure on people to be extrovert. How many times were you told at school to speak up more?

## What's going on in your head?

If you are an introvert, there are some very interesting things going on in your head and your heart. Myers Briggs identifies four functional preferences (sensing, intuition, feeling and thinking), all of which play out in a person's behaviour. But they do so in a particular order (from most preferred to least preferred).

For introverts their most preferred function (and the one they are usually best at) happens inside them – it is concealed from the outside world. On the other hand, the extrovert displays his or her best function to the outside world. Imagine an introvert and an extrovert

attending interviews for the same job. Who do you think would be most likely to impress? Introverts, because they hide their best function, are often under-estimated, especially by extroverts who find it very difficult to understand introversion.

## Easy and difficult things

Introverts find it easier to have a few, deep relationships rather than many shallow ones. They reflect all the time on their experiences of the world around them, but they need solitude to do this. During the day they gradually get drained of energy if they are required to socialise or interact with others constantly.

Introverts find it really hard to keep up small talk at a party or in a work situation. They find networking very tiring. They often avoid calling attention to themselves, and so making presentations or speeches can sometimes be exhausting. For the same reason they are unlikely to disclose personal feelings or observations without prompting.

In relationships introverts often present an incomplete picture of themselves, and as a result can be misunderstood or even distrusted. In the absence of evidence, others will often fill the void with assumptions. The chances of these assumptions being valid are low.

Two introverts together often sense what each other is thinking and feeling, but are always going to struggle with talking about personal matters with each other. Of course they will also find it very hard to get help from others outside the relationship, so they do sometimes get stuck in different places.

An introvert and extravert together will find each other very tiring. Introverts are at their intellectual best in the morning (before the exhausting process of social interaction has started). Extraverts get more energised as the day goes on (once the life-giving process of social interaction has been playing out for a bit). Maybe lunchtime would be a good time for them to get together for a chat!

## Strategies for making the most of being an introvert

We have seen that the functional preferences identified by Myers Briggs play out in each person in order of preference. In the same way, during a person's life, they will master their most preferred preference first (which in the case of introverts happens inside them). They then tackle their second preference and practise that (usually in their teens). In mid – life they might work on their third preference, and then finally they will get to the least preferred function, perhaps in retirement. This is why people usually become more rounded in personality as they get older. People who have developed a rounded personality are much more effective at work and at play.

So the first thing introverts can do to bring balance to their personality is to focus on their second preference. It's the easiest one to work on, and usefully it happens in the outside world (compared to the inside world of the first preference) – so people will notice the

change quickly. For instance, if your Myers Briggs type is ISTJ, the four functional preferences, in descending order of preference, are S-T-F-N. Sensing (the first preference) happens inside the introvert. Thinking (the second) happens outside – people will hear this person analysing and being rational. The introvert can seek out opportunities to do this “thinking aloud” more, and practise their extravert behaviour using this function.

They can also plan to do their networking and social interaction earlier in the day (when they are more energised). They should also make sure there is space before and after meetings so that they can recharge in peace.

If you are an introvert think about talking people through the results of your internal first preferred function (in the case of ISTJs this would mean discussing the data and evidence you have collected). Remember, this is the thing you are best at so there is no need to be afraid about showing it off.

Explain to colleagues and friends that you are an introvert, and therefore there are ways in which you prefer to interact with them – you can’t expect the world to reorder itself around you, but you can expect people to make reasonable adjustments to their behaviour in order to get the most from your input.

Remember that extraverts need stimulation, so if you want to get the best from them you will need to let them talk through issues, explore things verbally, and engage in small talk to smooth the way. This chatter might seem to you as if it is 98% content-free, but you need to make reasonable adjustments as well.

## Getting started

Practice makes perfect, so try out small ways of extravert-like behaving during your day. Here are some examples:

- o Next time you are having a chat with a friend, disclose something about your feelings or inner thoughts – see what happens
- o Practise talking when you would normally be quiet – in the corridor say hello to passers by, in shops say something more than thank you to the assistant
- o At the next meeting you attend, seek out a participant you have not met before and introduce yourself to them before someone introduces you
- o The next time a thought occurs to you in a meeting, say it rather than writing it down
- o If someone asks a question in a meeting, get the first word in rather than waiting for everyone else to speak

- o Take a look at your diary and move meetings so that they occur when you will have most energy
- o If you have friends who are introverts, or many of your colleagues are introverts, talk to them about their experiences of this preference.

### **What to do if you are extravert**

If you are an extravert and you want the introvert in your life to know you care:

- o First, recognise that it's not a choice. It's not a lifestyle. It's a preference.
- o Second, when you see an introvert lost in thought, don't say "What's the matter?" or "Are you all right?"
- o Third, don't say anything else, either.

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