

The background of the entire cover is a solid blue color. It is decorated with numerous white silhouettes of fish of various sizes and shapes, swimming in different directions. Some fish are clustered together, while others are solitary. In the center of the cover, where the word 'INTROVERTS' is written, there is a single orange fish silhouette that is slightly larger and more prominent than the others, positioned behind the letter 'O'.

# The Secret Lives of INTROVERTS

Inside Our  
Hidden World

Jenn Granneman

# PRAISE FOR *THE SECRET LIVES OF INTROVERTS*

“Jenn Granneman is among the most sensitive and thoughtful introvert authors today ... *The Secret Lives of Introverts* brings to life the experiences every introvert shares and helps us embrace our quiet nature in a very loud world.”

—Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* and creator of *Quiet Revolution*

“Introverts love secrets, and here, Jenn Granneman opens us to a rich world of them—secrets about what introverts think, desire, and feel; how our brains operate; why we get hangovers without drinking; how to navigate love and work; and what liberates us. An intimate line to the wisdom of introverts—without the awkward introduction and small talk.”

—Laurie Helgoe, PhD, author of *Introvert Power: Why Your Inner Life is Your Hidden Strength*

“Reading Jenn Granneman’s *The Secret Lives of Introverts* is like sitting on a stoop with a friend who understands the stigmas you face as an introvert. She offers you support and gentle guidance to navigate this noisy world.... Granneman combines compelling anecdotes and the latest research for a fact-filled and enjoyable read, succeeding at her mission to let introverts everywhere know that it’s okay to be who they are.”

—Nancy Ancowitz, presentation and career coach and author of *Self-Promotion for Introverts®*

“Provides introverts and those close to them with validating insight regarding their nature. It clears many of the common misconceptions surrounding introversion. It’s a wonderful in-depth guide that lets introverts know we are not alone in our way of being, while informing those less introverted of our strengths, gifts, and ability to be happy as we are.”

—Brenda Knowles, creator of Space2Live and author of *The Quiet Rise of Introverts: 8 Practices for Living and Loving in a Noisy World*

“This one goes out to all of us who have a still surface but depths that teem with energy and life. Allow [Jenn Granneman] to show you the magic of your inner worlds and how to quietly bless others with what stirs down deep.”

—Adam S. McHugh, author of *Introverts in the Church* and *The Listening Life*

“*The Secret Lives of Introverts* is the new introvert’s bible containing everything you need to know to understand, embrace, and celebrate your introversion. Granneman strikes a blissful balance between intriguing research on the science of introversion and heartfelt personal stories and insights that will have you shouting ‘amen’ in agreement (in your head, of course). True to her introverted nature, Granneman takes a thoughtful and thorough approach to explaining the many intricacies of being an introvert in an extrovert-biased world.”

—Michaela Chung, author of *The Irresistible Introvert: Harness The Power of Quiet Charisma in a Loud World*

“Jenn Granneman conveys everything that is beautiful and unique about what it means to be an introvert. She guides us through some difficult moments in life that are all too familiar to anyone who has struggled coming to terms with their quiet personality.”

—Debbie Tung, author of *Quiet Girl in a Noisy World* and creator of *Where’s My Bubble*

“*The Secret Lives of Introverts* is a book for everyone, introverts and extroverts alike. From the first embrace of chapter one, introverts who have endured the pain of feeling out of place, inadequate, or outright weird will feel remarkably understood.... Jenn’s warmth and exceptional ability to connect with her readers makes *The Secret Lives of Introverts* an enjoyable, validating, and encouraging must read. I love this book, and you will too!”

—Aaron Caycedo-Kimura, author of *Text, Don’t Call: An Illustrated Guide to the Introverted Life*

“One of the best books I’ve ever read on introvert empowerment. Granneman’s fearless honesty about what it means to be an introvert in today’s loud, fast, and busy world filled with overcrowded schedules and spaces is desperately needed by all of us who have ever felt ‘too sensitive.’ She’s given me my new personal mantra: ‘In your alone time, you’re free.’”

—Lauren Sapala, author of *The INFJ Writer*

“Reading this book was like finding a decoder ring for introverts. Jenn Granneman’s candid, eloquent description of the introvert experience had me nodding along and underlining parts. It’s wonderful to know that we are not alone, even in our need for solitude and quiet.”

—Nanea Hoffman, founder of *Sweatpants & Coffee*

“*The Secret Lives of Introverts* is for every introvert who has felt different. Filled with practical advice just for introverts on everything from romance to careers ... its pages are filled with “mhm” moments and “aha” insights.”

—Thea Orozco, visibility advisor at *Introvertology*

The Secret Lives of  
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Hidden World

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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my grandpa, John Granneman, and my uncle, Dave Granneman, who both passed away while I was writing it. Grandpa John loved studying the Wild West, drinking black coffee, reading the newspaper end to end, and rolling his own cigarettes at the kitchen table. He was a quiet man who didn't say much, and he once confided in me that he had always been an introvert. Uncle Dave loved a good conspiracy theory and tales of UFOs, and if you got him going, he could really talk. He was half extrovert, half legend.

John Granneman April 23, 1925, to January 23, 2017

David Granneman April 12, 1949, to February 25, 2017

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# INTRODUCTION

Dear introvert,

One of my earliest memories as a little girl is my dad putting a microphone to my lips and asking me to tell a story. *Okay*, I thought, *this should be easy*. I had been telling stories to myself already, in my mind, each night before I fell asleep, even though I was too young to read or write.

I closed my eyes and imagined a horse who played with her friends in a sunny meadow. Like many introverted children, my inner world was vivid and alive. The made-up story seemed almost as real as the actual world around me of toys and parents and pets. The horse and her friends were having a race to see who was the fastest. They dashed through fields of flowers and jumped over a glistening creek, when, all of the sudden, one of them started to flap her tiny, hidden wings and fly ...

Suddenly, my dad interrupted my thoughts. “You have to say your story out loud,” he said, nodding to the microphone. “So I can record it.”

I looked at the microphone, then back at my dad, but I didn’t know how to respond. The things inside me had to be spoken? How could mere words describe the striking images I saw in my mind—and how they made me feel?

Sensing my hesitancy, my dad prompted again. “Just say what you’re thinking,” he said, as if that were the easiest thing in the world.

But I couldn’t. I continued to stare at my dad in silence. The secret world inside me would not come out. My dad grew impatient, probably thinking his only daughter was being stubborn, uncreative. The truth was I had no idea how to translate my inner experience into words. Somehow, I thought that with my father’s supreme intelligence, he would just know what I meant to say. But he couldn’t read my thoughts. And the microphone attached to the primitive eighties tape recorder couldn’t hear them. Eventually, he gave up and put everything away.

This would not be the last time in my life that my silence confused and frustrated someone. I would carry that feeling of disconnect between my inner world and

the outer one with me for much of my life.

If you're an introvert like me, you may have secrets inside you, too. You have thoughts that you don't have the words to express and big ideas that no one else sees. Maybe your secret is you feel lonely even when you're surrounded by other people. Perhaps you're doing certain things and acting a certain way only because you think you're *supposed* to. Maybe your heart longs for just one person to see the real you—and to know what's really going on inside your head.

This is a book about secrets. It's about seeing what's really going on with introverts. It's about finally feeling understood.

Thank you for joining me in this journey. If you have a secret like the one I just described, I hope you will feel less alone about it after reading this book.

Quietly yours,

Jenn

## Chapter 1

# THIS IS FOR ALL THE QUIET ONES

When I was in sixth grade, I was lucky enough to be scooped up by a great group of girls who would become my lifelong friends. We slept over at each other's houses and whispered secrets in the dark. We spied on the boy who lived in the neighborhood and his friends, and giggled over who we had crushes on. We filled notebook after notebook with our dreams for the future. We even promised to reunite every Fourth of July as adults on a hill by our high school, so we would always have a place in each other's lives.

Anyone looking at us would have thought I was just one of the girls. We did almost everything together. People even said we looked like sisters. But deep down, I felt different. I wasn't one of them. I was *other*.

While they read *Seventeen* magazine and chatted about celebrities, I sat silently on the edges, wondering if there was life on other planets. When they were relieved that another school year was over and that summer vacation had begun, I was catapulted into a deep existential crisis about growing older. When they wanted to hang out all night, and then the next day, and then the *next*, I was desperately searching for an excuse to be alone. ("Mom, tell them I'm sick! Or that I have to go to church!") In so many little ways, I was the weird one.

My friend group was the center of my teenage world. I *loved* them. So I did what anyone does when they feel like they are an alien dropped into this world from another planet: at times, I pretended. I kept my secret thoughts to myself. I didn't let on when I wished I could be alone in my bedroom instead of at the mall, surrounded by people. I tried to be the person I thought I *should* be—fun-loving and always ready to hang out.

All that pretending got exhausting. But I did it because I thought that's what everyone else was doing—pretending. I figured they were just a lot better at



hiding their true feelings than I was.

## **There Must Be Something Wrong with Me**

As an adult, I still couldn't shake the feeling of being "different." I worked as a journalist for a few years, then went back to school to become a teacher, thinking this would be more meaningful work. My graduate program was full of outgoing would-be teachers who always had something to say. They sat in little groups on breaks, bursting with energetic chatter, even after we'd just spent hours doing collaborative learning or having a group discussion. I, on the other hand, bolted for the door on breaks as quickly as possible—my head was spinning from all the noise and activity, and my energy level was at zero. Also, talking in front of our class or answering a question on the spot was no problem for them. I, however, avoided the spotlight as much as possible. Whenever I had to present a lesson plan, I felt compelled to practice exactly what I was going to say, until I got it "perfect." Even then, I usually couldn't keep my hands from shaking.

I had also gotten married. My husband (now ex-husband) was a confident, life-of-the-party guy who could talk to anyone. His large family was the same way. They loved spending time together in a loud gaggle of kids, siblings, and friends of the family. Often, they'd drop by our small apartment, letting me know they were coming only when they were already on their way. They'd pass hours crammed into the living room, telling stories, cracking jokes, and volleying sarcastic remarks back and forth with the professional finesse of Venus and Serena Williams. I, once again, sat quietly on the edges, never knowing how to wedge myself into these fast-moving conversations or what to say. As the night wore on, I often found myself slipping into an exhausted brain fog, which made it even harder to participate. Most nights, what I really wanted was to read a book alone, play a video game, or just be with my husband.

When comparing myself to my extroverted in-laws and classmates, I never seemed to measure up. My disparaging thoughts returned. Why couldn't I just loosen up and go with the flow? Why did I never have much to say when I was in a big group but had plenty to talk about during a one-on-one? Why was my idea of a good time so different from what other people wanted to do?

I was broken. I had to be.

Things didn't look like they would ever get better. At one point, I had a complete breakdown. I found myself awake in the middle of the night, frantically crying, typing everything that was wrong with me and my life into a Word document. I just couldn't take it anymore. I was too different—too messed

up. The world was too much, too loud, too harsh. I think finally expressing all the secret feelings that had built up inside me—in a raw, unfiltered way—saved me. When I reread what I had written, I realized I couldn't keep living this way.

Somehow, I made it through that terrible night. Soon after, I discovered something about myself that changed my life.

## **One Magic Word: *Introvert***

One afternoon, in the psychology/self-help section of a used bookstore, I came across a book called *The Introvert Advantage* by Marti Olsen Laney. I bought it and read it cover to cover. When I finished, I cried. I had never felt so understood in my life.

That beautiful book told me there was a word for what I was: *introvert*. It was a magic word, because it explained many of the things I had struggled with my entire life—things that had made me feel bad about myself. Best of all, the word meant I wasn't alone. There were other people out there like me. Other introverts.

Say what you will about labeling. That little label changed my life.

I went on to read everything about introversion I could get my hands on. I read *Quiet* by Susan Cain, *Introvert Power* by Laurie Helgoe, *The Introvert's Way* by Sophia Dembling, and others. I became interested in personality type and high sensitivity, too. Turns out I'm not just an introvert but also a highly sensitive person (but I'll leave that topic for another time). After reading dozens of books about introversion, I turned to the Internet. I joined Facebook groups for introverts and poured over blogs. My friends got sick of me constantly talking about introversion: "Did you know it's an *introvert thing* to need time to think before responding?" I'd say, or, "I can't go out tonight, it's *introvert time*."

I couldn't shut up about being an introvert. It was like I had been reading the wrong script my entire life, trying to play the role of the person I thought I *should* be—not the person I truly was.

Don't get me wrong. Learning about my introversion didn't fix all my problems. It would take several years of hard, inner work—along with consciously deciding to make real changes in my life—before things got better. But for me, embracing my introversion—and stopping myself from trying to pretend to be an extrovert—was the first step. As I learned more about introversion, I became more confident in who I was. I started accepting my need for alone time. I saw my quiet, reflective nature as a strength, not a liability. I also started working on my social skills, seeing them as simply that—skills I

could improve and use to my advantage. But most important, for the first time in my life, I started to actually like myself.

I was no longer an *other*. I was something else: an introvert.

## **Now I'm on a Mission**

Today, I'm the voice behind *Introvert, Dear*, the popular online community for introverts. I never set out to be an advocate for introverts, but, when something changes your life, you want to tell other people about it. I started *Introvert, Dear* as my personal blog in 2013. At the time, I was working as a teacher, living with roommates, and truly dating for the first time in my adult life. I decided I would chronicle my life as an introvert living in a society that seems geared toward extroverts. I kept my blog anonymous so I could write whatever I wanted without fearing what other people would think (so very introverted of me). For my bio, I used a picture of just my shoulder that showed off a tattoo of five birds I had just gotten. My face was mostly hidden.

Staring at my computer screen, alone in my bedroom one night, I named my little blog *Introvert, Dear*. I imagined a wise, older introverted woman counseling a younger introverted woman. The young woman was lying on a chaise lounge, and the older woman was sitting in a chair nearby, the kind of setup you see in movies when someone goes to a therapist. The older one began her advice to the younger one by saying, "Now, introvert, *dear* ..."

The first blog post I wrote got more comments about my tattoo than anything actually related to what I'd written. But I kept writing, mostly just for myself. And people kept reading. I didn't know it then, but *Introvert, Dear* was another step in my journey toward healing. Once again, expressing myself honestly relieved some of the pain I was feeling. And connecting with other introverts made me feel less self-conscious about my "weird" ways.

Today, *Introvert, Dear* is less of a blog and more of an online publishing platform. It features not just my voice, but hundreds of introvert voices, and it brings together introverts from all over the world. My writing about introverts has been featured in publications like the *Huffington Post*, *Thought Catalog*, Susan Cain's *Quiet Revolution*, the *Mighty*, and others. Now I'm on a mission: to let introverts everywhere know it's okay to be who they are. I don't ever want another introvert to feel the way I did when I was younger.

## **Are You an Introvert?**

What about you? Have you always felt different? Were you the quiet one in school? Did people ask you, “Why don’t you talk more?” Do they still ask you that today?

If so, you might be an introvert like me. Introverts make up 30 to 50 percent of the population, and we help shape the world we live in. We might be your parent, friend, spouse, significant other, child, or coworker. We lead, create, educate, innovate, do business, solve problems, charm, heal, and love. Introversion is a temperament, which is different from your personality; temperament refers to your inborn traits that organize how you approach the world, while personality can be defined as the pattern of behavior, thoughts, and emotions that make you an individual. It can take years to build a personality, but your temperament is something you’re born with.

But the most important thing to know about being an introvert is that there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re not broken because you’re quiet. It’s okay to stay home on a Friday night instead of going to a party. Being an introvert is a perfectly normal “thing” to be.

Are you an introvert? Here are twenty-two signs that you might veer toward introversion on the spectrum. How many do you relate to? These signs may not apply to every introvert, but I believe they are generally true:

1. **You enjoy spending time alone.** You have no problem staying home on a Saturday night. In fact, you look forward to it. To you, Netflix and chill *really means* watching Netflix and relaxing. Or maybe your thing is reading, playing video games, drawing, cooking, writing, knitting tiny hats for cats, or just lounging around the house. Whatever your preferred solo activity is, you do it as much as your schedule allows. You feel good when you’re alone. In your alone time, you’re free.
2. **You do your best thinking when you’re alone.** Your alone time isn’t just about indulging in your favorite hobbies. It’s about giving your mind time to decompress. When you’re with other people, it may feel like your brain is too overloaded to really work the way it should. In solitude, you’re free to tune into your own inner monologue, rather than paying attention to what’s going on around you. You might be more creative and/or have deeper insights when you’re alone.
3. **Your inner monologue never stops.** You have a distinct inner voice that’s always running in the back of your mind. If people could hear the thoughts that ran through your head, they may, in turn, be surprised, amazed, and perhaps horrified. Whatever their reaction might be, your inner narrator is

something that's hard to shut off. Sometimes you can't sleep at night because your mind is still going. Thoughts from your past haunt you. "I can't believe I said that stupid thing ... five years ago!"

4. **You often feel lonelier in a crowd than when you're alone.** There's something about being with a group that makes you feel disconnected from yourself. Maybe it's because it's hard to hear your inner voice when there's so much noise around you. Or maybe you feel like an *other*, like I did. Whatever the reason, as an introvert, you crave intimate moments and deep connections—and those usually aren't found in a crowd.



5. **You feel like you're faking it when you have to network.** Walking up to strangers and introducing yourself? You'd rather stick tiny needles under

your fingernails. But you know there's value in it, so you might do it anyway—except you feel like a phony the entire time. If you're anything like me, you had to teach yourself how to do it. You might have read self-help books about how to be a better conversationalist or exude more charisma. In the moment, you have to activate your “public persona.” You might say things to yourself like, “Smile, make eye contact, and use your loud-confident voice!” Then, when you're finished, you feel beat, and you need downtime to recover. You wonder, *Does everyone else have to try this hard when meeting new people?*

6. **You're not the student shooting your hand up every time the teacher asks a question.** You don't need all that attention. You're content just *knowing* that you know the answer—you don't have to prove it to anyone else. At work, this may translate to not saying much during meetings. You'd rather pull your boss aside afterward and have a one-on-one conversation, or email your ideas, rather than explain them to a room full of people. The exception to this is when you feel truly passionate about something. On rare occasions, even shy introverts have been known to transform themselves into a force to be reckoned with when it really counts. It's all about how much something matters to you; you'll risk overstimulation when you think speaking up will truly make a difference.
7. **You're better at writing your thoughts than speaking them.** You prefer texting to calling and emailing to face-to-face meetings. Writing gives you time to reflect on what to say and how to say it. It allows you to edit your thoughts and craft your message just so. Plus, there's less pressure when you're typing your words into your phone alone than when you're saying them to someone in real time. But it isn't just about texting and emailing. Many introverts enjoy journaling for self-expression and self-discovery. Others make a career out of writing, such as John Green, author of the bestselling young adult novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. In his YouTube video, “Thoughts from Places: The Tour,” Green says, “Writing is something you do alone. It's a profession for introverts who want to tell you a story but don't want to make eye contact while doing it.”
8. **Likewise, talking on the phone does not sound like a fun way to pass the time.** One of my extroverted friends is always calling me when she's alone in her car. She figures that although her eyes, hands, and feet are currently occupied, her mouth is not. Plus, there are no people around—how boring! So she reaches for her phone. (Remember to practice safe driving, kids.)

However, this is not the case for me. When I have a few spare minutes of silence and solitude, I have no desire to fill that time with idle chitchat.

9. **You'd rather not engage with people who are angry.** Psychologist Marta Ponari and collaborators found that people high in introversion don't show what's called the "gaze-cueing effect." Normally, if you were to view the image of a person's face on a computer screen looking in a certain direction, you would follow that person's gaze; therefore, you'd respond more quickly to a visual target on that side of the screen than when the person's gaze and the target point in opposite directions. Introverts and extroverts both do this, with one exception: if the person seems mad, introverts don't show the gaze-cueing effect. This suggests that people who are very introverted don't want to look at someone who seems angry. Ponari and her team think that this is because they are more sensitive to potentially negative evaluations. Meaning, if you think a person is mad because of something related to you, even their gaze becomes a threat.
10. **You avoid small talk whenever possible.** When a coworker is walking down the hall toward you, have you ever turned into another room in order to avoid having a "Hey, what's up?" conversation with them? Or have you ever waited a few minutes in your apartment when you heard your neighbors in the hallway so you didn't have to chat? If so, you might be an introvert, because introverts tend to avoid small talk. We'd rather talk about something meaningful than fill the air with chatter just to hear ourselves make noise. We find small talk inauthentic, and, frankly, many of us feel awkward doing it.
11. **You've been told you're "too intense."** This stems from your dislike of small talk. If it were up to you, mindless chitchat would be banished. You'd much rather sit down with someone and discuss the meaning of life—or, at the very least, exchange some real, honest thoughts. Have you ever had a deep conversation and walked away feeling energized, not drained? That's what I'm talking about. Meaningful interactions are the introvert's antidote to social burnout.
12. **You don't go to parties to meet new people.** Birthday parties, wedding receptions, staff holiday parties, or whatever—you party every once in a while. But when you go to an event, you probably don't go with the goal of making new friends; you'd rather hang out with the people you already know. That's because, like a pair of well-worn sneakers, your current friends feel good on you. They know your quirks, and you feel comfortable around

them. Plus, making new friends would mean making small talk.

13. **You shut down after too much socializing.** A study from Finnish researchers Sointu Leikas and Ville-Juhani Ilmarinen shows that socializing eventually becomes tiring to both introverts *and* extroverts. That's likely because socializing expends energy. Not only do you have to talk, but you also have to listen and process what's being said. Plus, you're taking in all kinds of sensory information, such as someone's tone of voice and body language—along with filtering out any background noises or visual distractions. It's no wonder people get drained. But there are some very real differences between introverts and extroverts; on average, introverts really do prefer solitude and quiet more than their extroverted counterparts. In fact, if you're an introvert, you might experience something that's been dubbed the "introvert hangover." Like a hangover induced by one too many giant fishbowl margaritas, you feel sluggish and icky after too much socializing. Your brain seems to stop working, and, in your exhaustion, you cease to be able to hold a conversation or say words that make sense. You just want to lie down in a quiet, dark room and not move or talk for a while. That's because introverts can become overstimulated by socializing and shut down (more about the introvert hangover later).
14. **You notice details that others miss.** It's true that introverts (especially highly sensitive introverts) can get overwhelmed by too much stimuli. But there's an upside to our sensitivity—we notice details that others might miss. For example, you might notice a subtle change in your friend's demeanor signaling that she's upset (but oddly, no one else in the room sees it). Or, you might be highly tuned in to color, space, and texture, making you an incredible visual artist.
15. **You can concentrate for long periods of time on things that matter to you.** I can write for hours. I get in the zone, and I just keep going. I don't need anyone or anything else to entertain me—as I write, I enter a state of flow. I block out distractions and hone in on what I need to accomplish. If you're an introvert, you likely have activities or pet projects that you could work on for practically forever. That's because introverts are great at focusing alone for long periods of time. If it weren't for introverts and our amazing ability to focus, we wouldn't have the theory of relativity, Google, or Harry Potter (yes, Einstein, Larry Page, and J. K. Rowling are all likely introverts). Dear society, where would you be without us? You're welcome. Love, introverts.



16. **You live in your head.** In fact, you may daydream so much that people have told you to “get out of your head” or “come down to earth.” That’s because your inner world is rich and vivid. Not all introverts have strong imaginations (that trait is correlated with “openness to experience” on the Big Five personality scale, not “extroversion-introversion”), but many of us do.
17. **You like to people watch.** Actually, you just like to observe in general, whether it’s people, nature, *etc.* Introverts are natural observers. They can often be found hanging out along the edges of a party or event, just watching, rather than in the thick of things.
18. **You’ve been told you’re a good listener.** You don’t mind giving the stage to someone else for a bit and listening. You’re not clamoring to get every thought out there, because you don’t need to “talk to think” or vocalize everything that crosses your mind the way some extroverts do. Listening—truly listening—means you get to learn something new or better understand what makes someone tick.
19. **You have a small circle of friends.** You’re close with just one, two, or three people, and you consider everyone else to be an acquaintance. That’s because introverts only have so much “people” energy to spend, so we choose our relationships carefully. It’s about budgeting.
20. **You don’t get “high” off your environment.** There’s a reason why crowds, parties, and networking events aren’t your thing: introverts and extroverts differ in how their brains process experiences through reward centers. Neurobiologists Yu Fu and Richard Depue demonstrated this phenomenon by giving Ritalin to introverted and extroverted college students (Ritalin is a drug used to treat ADHD that stimulates the production of the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine in the brain). They found that extroverts were more likely to connect their feelings of bliss with the environment they were in. However, introverts did not associate the feeling of reward with their surroundings. This suggests that introverts have a basic difference in how strongly they process rewards from their environment (more about introverts and rewards later). According to the researchers, the brains of introverts may weigh internal cues more strongly than external ones. In other words, introverts don’t feel “high” from their surroundings; instead, we’re paying more attention to what’s going on inwardly.
21. **You’re an old soul.** Introverts tend to observe, process information deeply,

and reflect before they speak. Analytical by nature, we're often interested in discovering the deeper meaning or underlying pattern behind events. Because of this, introverts can seem wise, even from a young age.

22. **You alternate between being with people and being alone.** Introverts relish being alone. In our solitude, we have the freedom to tune into our inner voice and tune out the noise of the world; as we do this, we gain energy and clarity. But introverts don't always want to be alone. As human beings, we're wired to connect with others, and as introverts, we long to connect meaningfully. So introverts live in two worlds: we visit the world of people, but solitude and the inner world will always be our home.

## Still Not Sure?

Still not sure if you're an introvert? Here's a quick test. Answer these two questions honestly:

1. If you had to choose between two options for a dream vacation, which one would you pick?
  - A) A relaxing vacation by yourself or with just one other person, a good book, and a secluded cabin.
  - B) A group vacation with your friends or family, doing exciting things, like gambling in Las Vegas or partying on a cruise ship.

Don't think about what you *should* do or what's expected of you. Which one would you pick if you didn't care what anyone else thought about you? As you probably guessed, if you chose the secluded cabin, you're more of an introvert. If you picked the second option, you're probably more extroverted.

2. Imagine your dream day. What activities would you do? Who would you want to hang out with?

If your perfect day consists of doing something low-key with just one or two people—or alone—you're probably an introvert. If you imagine yourself surrounded by lots of people doing something active, you're probably more of an extrovert.

Keep in mind that introversion and extroversion are not all-or-nothing traits. Imagine a spectrum with introversion on one end and extroversion on the other. Everyone lands somewhere on that spectrum, with some falling closer to the introverted end and others nearer the extroverted end. Nobody is a pure introvert

or extrovert. “Such a person would be in the lunatic asylum,” wrote Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist who first coined the term *introvert*. In other words, we all act “extroverted” in some situations and “introverted” in others. For example, when I’m with my close friends, I talk, laugh, argue, and sometimes even dance. It’s because I feel comfortable with them—but I’m still an introvert who needs plenty of alone time.

When writing this book, I talked with hundreds of introverts. True to introvert fashion, many of those “conversations” happened in writing, via email and social media. In a few instances, I was lucky enough to be able to sit down with someone and interview that person face-to-face. Throughout this book, I share comments from the introverts I interviewed, as well as research studies, my own experiences, and stories that have been published on [IntrovertDear.com](http://IntrovertDear.com). As an introvert, you may find yourself identifying with some parts of this book but not with others. Let me be clear: that’s perfectly okay. Just because you don’t relate to everything doesn’t mean you’re not an introvert. There’s no wrong way to do introversion.

### **Tips for Extroverts**

Do I spy an extrovert? Don’t think I didn’t see you, hanging out in my introvert book (most extroverts *loooove* being wherever there are people). But don’t worry, you’re welcome here, too. In fact, I’ve included tips in most chapters just for you to help you understand introverts better. Look for tips in a box like this one. Whether you’re an extrovert in a relationship with an introvert, the coworker of an introvert, the family member of an introvert, or the friend of an introvert, there’s something in this book for you, too.

### **Why I Wrote This Book**

For too long, introverts have been misunderstood. We may have been the ones who were bullied on the playground as kids for being too “different.” We may have great ideas but lack the self-confidence to say them out loud. We’ve been told we’re too quiet, too sensitive, or too shy. When we say we’re staying in tonight, pained looks from our friends tell us there’s something wrong with us. Conversations whispered by the adults of our childhood told us we are seriously

broken.

Keia, for example, is an introvert who feels like an outsider at work. “People always seem to think I’m upset or that I don’t want to be bothered, and, in some instances, it’s true,” she tells me. “I don’t mind chatting every once in a while, but I feel as though I do my best work when I’m silent and focused.” Her coworkers don’t understand her need for quiet. In fact, things have gotten pretty tense with them at times. They say things to her like, “You’re so quiet,” or, “You need to open up more.” This really frustrates Keia, because like many introverts, she’s at work to, well, *work*. Not make friends.

She wonders why she needs to talk more. She does her job well. She doesn’t dislike her coworkers. “I just enjoy being by myself,” she says. “I enjoy thinking and being in my own little world. It relaxes me, and I feel free. Sometimes people make me feel like I’m some sort of criminal for being an introvert. I wish that work environments were more supportive of people like us. We don’t mean any harm.”

Amanda is another introvert who feels out of place. When she started college, she hadn’t yet identified as an introvert. However, it quickly became obvious that she was different from the other students. After class, instead of going back to the dorms and cramming herself into someone’s tiny room with a dozen other co-eds to hang out, she’d sneak off by herself. She discovered a little park near campus and she’d spend hours there, studying or reading.

“I didn’t know why I did this or what it did for me,” she tells me. “I just needed to be by myself. I wasn’t shy or antisocial. I certainly didn’t know my time in the park was replenishing my energy or why I craved time alone when my friends didn’t.”

After spending time in the park, she could head back to the dorms and “survive the never-ending social interaction” that awaited her. But in the back of her mind, she knew other students weren’t doing this. Why was she so different?

And finally, there’s Justin. In college, he took a communications course. He knew, of course, that communication is so much more than just talking. But right away, he felt out of place. His class seemed to be full of extroverts who knew how to do only two things: talk loudly—and a lot.

“Everyone seemed to fit in, chatting here and there,” he tells me. “When someone noticed me being the only quiet person in the room, he asked me why. I told him, ‘Hey, I’m an introvert. I don’t feel the need to always talk.’” The classmate looked at him like he was an alien from another planet and asked him in a snarky tone why he bothered to enroll in a course about communication. Justin just smiled, and never said another word to him.

Why did I write this book? I wrote it for Keia, Amanda, and Justin. I wrote it

for my introverted twelve-year-old self who got drained after hanging out with her friends and didn't know why. I wrote it for all the members of the *Introvert, Dear* community. Most important, I wrote this book for you.

This is for all the quiet ones.

It's time to change how the world sees introverts. It's time to change how we introverts see ourselves. And I'll tell you a secret: it all starts when you begin working *with* your introversion, rather than *fighting against it*. I'll show you how. Read on.

## Chapter 3

# INTROVERTS ARE RUDE (AND OTHER MISCONCEPTIONS)

I recently attended a blogging workshop. Seated at a table with three other writers, we introduced ourselves by saying what we wrote about. There was a food writer, a political junkie, and a parenting blogger. Then it was my turn. “I’m Jenn, and I write about introverts,” I said, reminding myself to use my “loud-confident” voice while smiling and briefly looking each person in the eye. (Don’t laugh. I bet you say things like this in your head, too. Talking to strangers is hard.)

The food blogger perked up. She had been chatting up the table from the moment I sat down. She would later tell me that she identifies as an extrovert. “Oh, that’s great!” she cooed. “So you teach introverts *how not to be introverted*?”

I stared at her. A dozen thoughts exploded in my head at once. I wanted to tell her that introverts don’t need to be fixed. That there’s nothing wrong with being an introvert. I could feel myself tensing up as I opened my mouth to speak.

But I didn’t say any of that. I didn’t have to. Suddenly, the political junkie chimed in. “I’m an introvert, and I don’t want to change that,” she proudly declared. “I think you’re misunderstanding what it means to be introverted.”

I swear I almost shouted, “Amen!”

Unfortunately, this sort of thing happens all the time. Like the extroverted blogger, people have the wrong idea about introversion. Even some *introverts* don’t understand it. Once, someone told me they liked spending time alone, were not into big social events, and listened more than they spoke—but there was no way they could be an introvert because they didn’t get nervous when talking to people. Similarly, I see a lot of misconceptions about introversion online. Google’s definition of an introvert is “a shy, reticent person.” (Not all introverts

are shy, and I think *reticent* misses the mark.) Even in my own Facebook group for introverts, people confuse introversion with depression, anxiety, or mental illness.

Likewise, while writing this book, I came face-to-face with misconceptions about introversion. When I told others that my book was about introverts, they'd often get a funny look on their face. "Are you an introvert?" they'd usually ask next. It seemed as though they were surprised to find out that a self-professed introvert could even hold a conversation. "Oh, you must feel *waaaaay* out of your comfort zone talking to me then!" one very extroverted woman I had just met exclaimed. (I didn't.) "But you're not an introvert," another said. "I've seen you talk to people!"

And there's another reason to debunk misconceptions about introverts. Research by Aron W. Siegman and Theodore M. Dembroski suggests that acting falsely extroverted can lead to burnout, stress, and cardiovascular disease. More research into this area is still needed, but this effect is likely caused by the overstimulation and anxiety that can result from introverts overextending themselves socially. Turns out, embracing your introverted nature isn't just a feel-good axiom; it's actually good for your physical health. But we can't embrace our quiet nature until we understand what it truly is—and that starts with clearing up misconceptions about it.

Has someone ever had the wrong idea about you? Read on. In this chapter, we'll address some common misconceptions about introversion.

## **Misconception #1: Introversion Is Simply Rudeness**

It was my first year of college, and the sophomore in the dorm room across the hall from me had invited me to dinner. She was outgoing, loud, and blunt—the kind of person who would say anything to anyone. In hindsight, she was probably an extrovert.

At the restaurant, we ordered appetizers, and she asked me where I was from (Minnesota) and what my major was (writing)—all the usual get-to-know-you small talk. I thought our first "friend date" was going well, as well as it could for a socially awkward introvert like me. But then she said something that shocked me. "You're actually a really cool person. When I first met you, you hardly said anything, so I thought you were kind of a bitch."

*Kind of a bitch.* She tossed off the words as coolly as if she had just informed me that my mozzarella sticks had arrived. In some twisted way, I think she meant it as a compliment.

I didn't know what to say. I froze, then uttered a weak "Haha, thanks." I tried to pretend like everything was okay, but in reality, her words wounded me. Sure, I was quiet. I kept to myself on campus. I often spent Friday nights lying in bed reading books from my classes that I found interesting. I had a boyfriend and a few close friends, and they were all I needed to fill my social quota. I'd never thought my introverted ways were seen as bitchy. I was just doing my own thing.

Turns out, being called bitchy, rude, or aloof is a common introvert problem. "I have been accused of being an arrogant prick for avoiding small talk and favoring solitude," Leylani tells me. "I've been called 'ice queen,' " Anne says. "Also, many people have told me, 'You scared me when I first met you' because I didn't smile all the time." Allison adds, "After high school, when I would happen to meet someone I hadn't seen since high school, it inevitably would be said that they thought I was stuck up or bitchy." She would ask them if she had ever said something rude to them. "And it would turn out that, no, I didn't, but because I often sat alone and read or had headphones on, people assumed I thought I was superior to them. That baffled me. I certainly didn't want to be in with the 'in' crowd, but I also didn't actively dislike most people. Mostly I was just busy with my books and music and such."

To this day, I can't think of a time when I had been outright rude to my dormmate. I'd never insulted her, walked away when she was talking, or anything of the sort. What had probably happened was I'd passed her several times in the hallway, before we were friends, and hadn't said much. I definitely didn't stick my hand out and exclaim, "Hi, I'm Jenn! How's your day going?" I didn't see this as being rude. I was simply keeping to myself.

And herein lies the problem. Our reserved nature gets us in trouble. We don't bubble over with pleasantries, so we get accused of being unfriendly. We don't blab our life story to people we've just met, so we get accused of being aloof. But introverts don't see life as one big cocktail party. We're content with just a few meaningful relationships. We're not constantly scanning the environment, looking to add more adoring fans to our entourage.

As we go through the day, we're likely in our heads. Shalima, another introvert who has been accused of being rude, tells me, "When your mind is screaming at you with thoughts and ideas coming at you all at once, it's hard to be loud." Or we're simply observing our surroundings, as introverts tend to do. Amy says, "Quiet doesn't equal mad, sad, rude, bitchy, arrogant, or stuck-up. Quiet *does* equal people-watching, observing, and enjoying life ... quietly."

When my extroverted dormmate called me a bitch, I wish I'd spoken up. I wish I would have told her not to make assumptions about someone who is quiet. A person can be quiet for many reasons. They might be an introvert who



needs time to warm up to new people. They might be turned inward at the moment, enjoying the thoughts in their private inner world. Or that quiet person may simply be content with silence. Don't be too quick to judge.

Today, I make a point of saying hello when I pass neighbors in the hallway of my apartment building. When I'm in the right mood, I even engage in some back-and-forth ("Hey, I like your coat! Where'd you get it?"). But I probably won't hang around having a fifteen-minute conversation that started with "How 'bout this weather?" (Unless it's snowing, of course, which in that case is the *only* thing we Minnesotans want to talk about.) And I probably won't spontaneously invite anyone in for tea. I'm okay with that.

## **Misconception #2: The Introvert's Need for Solitude Is Antisocial**

When Jill was in high school, she felt exhausted and drained all the time because she didn't know how to work with her introversion like she does now. As a result, she got in a lot of trouble with her parents. "They never seemed to understand why I wanted to be on my own all the time, and I'm pretty sure they worried I was depressed or into something I shouldn't have been into since I liked to just sit at the computer all night," she tells me. "Thus, I was 'antisocial' and 'had a problem.' " It got to the point where Jill couldn't even handle the social stimulation from being in class. "I completely shut down and tuned out during the day at school," she says. "My teachers sat me down with my parents and basically told me to participate *or else*. I felt like I was defective, or a bad kid. I was just waiting for them to send me off to therapy or something so I could be 'fixed' for not wanting to participate."

Now Jill knows she felt drained because she was overstimulated from being around people and not being able to fully recharge afterward. "There was always so much pressure to participate in clubs, and then friends wanted a lot of my attention, too, once we got out of class," she tells me. "If I didn't give it to them, that caused a whole other slew of problems because if I wasn't 100 percent devoted to them, I was a 'bad friend.' I basically had to fake being an extrovert to get through it, and as a result, I was crabby and a 'stuck-up bitch'—this was a direct quote from an old classmate."

Connie had a similar problem. "I have a 'good friend' whom I will call Nikki," she says. "She is incredibly extroverted, funny, creative, well-spoken, and caring, but *loud*. She is loud *in every single way*. She talks loudly, she mothers loudly, she creates loudly, and in her relationships, she needs loud face-to-face time. She needs that intense, outside stimulation. So when we became

what she considered to be close friends, she took to calling me antisocial at every opportunity, due to the fact that I don't share her need for outside stimulation."

According to Connie, Nikki is a psychology major, so she feels like she "gets" everyone. "Maybe she understands that people have differing personalities and quirks, but as far as truly understanding, I beg to differ," Connie says. "She would tease me about not wanting to go out with her and her friends and for having a clean home and an orderly life—from her perspective." Connie thinks this is due to them having opposite personalities. "Just ten minutes with Nikki and I would start to check out. I would become completely overstimulated by all her loudness and her need to dominate the conversation. Hey, I'm as introverted as they come, but I do enjoy contributing to the conversation once in a while. Introversion does not equate to being antisocial, though I used to think so. That is until I truly came to understand and accept myself as an introvert."

Jill and Connie are the victims of another nasty misconception about introversion: Our need for alone time is seen as unsociable. Unhealthy, even. Extroverts can't fathom why we want to be alone often—they figure there's no way it can be good for us.

What they don't understand is there's a tiny, invisible battery inside introverts. This metaphorical battery contains all our juice for social interaction. When a chatty coworker goes on and on about her weekend and you're forced to listen, your battery drains a little. When you do a group lunch with everyone in your office and polite chitchat is mandatory, your battery drains more. When you attend your second cousin's wedding and play nice with relatives who last saw you when you were "only this tall!" your battery becomes depleted. It's not that introverts have an unhealthy need to be alone. Solitude is our sanity.

## **In Their Own Words**

I asked introverts to tell me about the misconceptions they face that are related to their introversion. Here's what they said:

"A misconception about us that I've run into is even after you explain what introversion is, a lot of times an extrovert still tries to give you advice on how to be more extroverted. What's frustrating is that this implies that introversion is an inferior personality type. It's like they think introverts just need to hear how to be extroverts, as if haven't been told that our entire lives. This is frustrating, but I think introverts have a responsibility to show

the world that the way we approach the world is valid and doesn't need to be fixed."

—Shelby

"I think the biggest misconception is that all introverts have social anxiety and don't enjoy socializing. My extroverted coworker knows that I'm an introvert. There have been times when she's assumed that I wouldn't be interested in things that involve socializing or presenting because I'm an introvert. If I mention I went to a party or something over the weekend, she will respond, 'Are you sure you're an introvert?' I've explained that being an introvert doesn't mean that I dislike people or socializing or that I'm shy, just that I need more alone time to recharge my batteries."

—Megan

"When I was explaining introversion to someone, they asked, 'Aren't you on medication for that?' I asked what medication and they said, 'Oh, you know, antidepressants.' "

—Chuk

"I once had an extroverted roommate who could never understand the hour of quiet, alone time I needed after work to decompress from taking phone calls all day. I told her I was going into my room and shutting the door, and that no, I wasn't mad at her, and no, I wasn't depressed. I just needed some alone time. Almost every day she would knock on my door, then open it. 'Are you mad at me? What's wrong? Let's go out!' Argh! I had to ask her to move out after a couple of months. She just didn't get it, and she told all of our mutual friends how stuck up and moody I was."

—Amy

"I am a teacher and I know how to turn myself on to teach and interact and lead others, but then I need to turn off to recharge. Once I was introduced to a group of my peers that I was about to present a training to—as 'a shy person.' I hated being called shy because I am not shy. I just prefer to not speak if I have nothing to say."

—Jennifer

"It's been my experience that people have often thought that I'm not as intelligent as I am. They assumed because I didn't contribute to the conversation, and chose instead to listen and observe, that I was dumb."

—Bonnie

“The biggest misconception I’ve faced as an introvert is that people think I’m not one! Most people in my life really struggle to understand that I have a lot of social anxiety, and it actually makes me ‘perform’ in public like I’m extroverted. I can be chatty, loud, engaged ... but all of it comes from fear, anxiety, and pressure. When I’m really being myself, I’m actually very quiet and reserved.”

—Aidan

“We don’t hate people. We just like to save our energy for certain things, and shallow interaction doesn’t cut it. But we are capable of small talk, though I can list about a thousand other things I would rather be doing.”

—Kamiko

“I don’t like the misunderstanding that introverts are necessarily hermits. We are human and have social needs as well.”

—Nelia

“People say, ‘There’s no way you’re an introvert, you’re so good at talking to people!’ I’ve worked in many jobs where I have to be ‘on’ most of the time. Because of this, I know how to do small talk and can do it well. But others don’t see what happens when I get home. I have to totally shut down, sometimes for up to an hour, to recharge enough to do tasks at home. It has taken me quite some time to realize that just because I’m able to chat doesn’t mean I’m an extrovert (like people told me), and to realize I need alone time to recharge. Now that I know this, I can begin to change my work habits and have a healthy inner life.”

—Rebecca

“The problem I run into frequently is the lunch break scenario. I like people and make friends easily, but I don’t like mindless socializing. Consequently, I prefer to eat lunch on my own. I find the noisy chitchat exhausting, and I need my lunch break time to clear my mind for the afternoon’s work. Most of my colleagues understand, but there are some who just don’t get it!”

—Lawrence

“People constantly underestimate me because I’m quiet and I don’t talk a lot. They don’t realize I like to stay out of the limelight and observe. I like

to work behind the scenes and fly under the radar. I know so much more than they think I know, and I prefer it that way.”

—Emily

“I think the worst part of growing up introverted was that people assumed I wanted to be otherwise. If you sit in a tree with a book at recess people assume you wish you were braiding hair with the pretty girls or smoking pot with the badass kids, but really you’re happy with what you’re doing.”

—Allison

### **Misconception #3: Introverts Lack Passion**

People often accuse Leanne Chapman of being unemotional. In an *Introvert, Dear* article, she writes, “Have you ever been to a workshop where the speaker bounds onto the stage and shouts, ‘ARE YOU EXCITED?!’ Or maybe someone gleefully asks you the same question at a party or social gathering. If you’re an introvert like me, you might find this question daunting. I can be excited about something but I won’t show it outwardly—although the people who know me well can tell. I’m introspective and quiet by nature, so my response to the question can simply be ‘Yes,’ said with a smile.”

I can relate to Leanne’s problem. There have been many times in my life when my lack of outward enthusiasm has created issues. For example, a few years ago, when I was dating for the first time as an adult, guys would tell me they thought I didn’t like them. Sometimes they were right—after a first date, I wanted nothing to do with them. But other times, I’d be swooning and planning our future together as Paramore’s “The Only Exception” played in my head. But I didn’t show my feelings in the typical extroverted way. I didn’t gush, sigh, or giggle. In fact, it seemed like the more I was into someone, the more I clammed up. Talk about counterproductive.

Although Leanne and I would probably get cut from the pep squad, that doesn’t mean we lack passion. Just because we don’t look excited doesn’t mean we’re not into something. Introverts can be just as emotional as extroverts—but we usually keep the bulk of those feelings hidden inside. Even if we’re having a bad day and a coworker asks, “How are you?” we may not want to talk about it. As Michaela Chung, author of *The Irresistible Introvert* puts it, “That’s the thing about introverts; we wear our chaos on the inside where no one can see it.” At least until you get to know us really, *really* well.

Eventually, Leanne learned to not care about what other people thought of her lack of enthusiasm. “If anyone says I don’t look excited enough or I’m too quiet, I will smile and point out that it’s just my nature,” she writes. “I don’t feel the need to defend myself, or to spend a lot of time with those people, because it doesn’t do me any good to be around anyone who inadvertently triggers my old beliefs about myself.”

“What many fail to see is that deep within the introvert there is a lot going on,” she continues. “But rather than giving it a voice directly through talk and chatter, the introvert expresses it through activism, journaling, painting, creating music, planting a flower garden, fighting for some special cause, or even well-placed silence.”

## **Misconception #4: Introverts Hate People**

In his semiautobiographical screenplay *Barfly*, Charles Bukowski penned a line that, decades later, would go on to become the introvert’s anthem. This line gets passed around a lot in introvert circles—perhaps you’ve heard it. In the screenplay, Wanda, a woman who has shacked up with the main character, Henry, asks him if he hates people. Henry, a lonely alcoholic, answers that no, despite appearances, he doesn’t; he simply feels better when there aren’t any people around. Unfortunately, like Henry, many introverts get accused of being misanthropes. Our friends and loved ones think we dislike people because we like spending time alone. However, for most introverts, this is simply not true. In fact, some introverts like people so much that they’ve chosen “extroverted” careers that force them to interact with people every day. Their jobs drain them, but they feel the sacrifice is worth it in order to serve humankind. Many introverts are social workers, teachers, counselors, doctors, project managers, and so on. For example, Karen has been an IT project manager in the health-care industry for over thirty-five years. She tells me that what she likes the most about her job is being able to help people use technology. There’s also Vanessa, who has been a social worker for ten years. She likes that her job lets her really get to know people and hear their stories. She gets to skip the small talk and jump right into meaningful conversation. Finally, Mary, a manufacturing consultant, feels that helping people by sharing her gifts is worth the sacrifice of becoming overstimulated. She says she loves seeing clients grow their businesses and fulfill their dreams.

## Misconception #5: All Introverts Are Shy

Another misconception about introverts is that we're all shy. But that's simply not true. Introversion and shyness are two different things. If you're shy, you fear being judged negatively by others; you may frequently feel bashful, timid, nervous, and insecure in social settings, as well as experience physical sensations, such as blushing or feeling shaky and breathless. If you're an introvert, you simply prefer calm, low-key environments. For example, a shy person might skip a dinner party because the thought of making small talk with strangers makes them scared and anxious, while an introvert might skip the party because relaxing at home is more enjoyable.

You can be an introvert who is not shy or an extrovert who is shy. For example, Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, is an introvert who's not the least bit shy. He's described by Susan Cain in a *Psychology Today* blog post as nerdy and quiet but also unruffled by anyone's opinion of him. On the other hand, Barbra Streisand, the larger-than-life music icon, is likely a shy extrovert. Most people don't know that she struggles with stage fright. After panicking during a performance in Central Park in 1967 and forgetting the words to one of her songs, Streisand avoided live performances for decades.

Of course, you can be both shy and an introvert. As one might predict, psychologists have found that shyness and introversion overlap somewhat, meaning that some introverts act shy and that some shy people are introverted. There are several possible reasons behind this. One reason is some people are born with "high-reactive" temperaments that make them inclined to both shyness and introversion, according to Cain. Also, shy people may become more introverted over time; because social life is a source of anxiety, they may be inspired to discover the joy of being alone. Also, introverts may become shy after repeatedly receiving the message from peers, teachers, and parents that there's something wrong with them.

It's important to know the difference between shyness and introversion, because if you're painfully shy, you can work to overcome your shyness. I did. I grew up horribly shy, but these days, I worry a lot less about what people think of me—and it's freeing. But the more significant takeaway is that there's a bias in our society against both traits. According to Cain, studies show that we rank fast and frequent talkers as more likable, capable, and intelligent than slow, quiet ones. This is the real misconception that needs to be squashed. Just because someone is shy (or introverted) does not mean they are any less competent and smart.

## **Misconception #6: Introverts Make Poor Leaders**

Managing others. Being in the spotlight. Taking risks. These are qualities we associate with leaders—and with extroversion. Does this mean introverts make poor leaders? Not at all. Introverts play a crucial role in every sphere of society, from business to politics to technology. In fact, *USA TODAY* reported that 40 percent of top executives are introverts. And some of the most notable leaders of our time are introverts, such as Bill Gates. He believes that introverts can make strong leaders. Speaking at an engagement in 2013, he said that there's a benefit to being introverted—introverts have the unique ability to separate themselves from others for a few days, which allows them to think deeply about a problem, read everything they can about it, and consider angles that others haven't.

Another introverted leader is Marissa Mayer, the CEO of Yahoo. Mayer told *Vogue* magazine that she gets the urge to run and hide during parties, even parties held at her own house. Her secret to dealing with her social avoidance tendencies? She looks at her watch and tells herself that she can't leave until a certain time. And, she promises herself, if she's still having a terrible time at X, she can leave. However, she usually finds that if she makes herself stay for a certain length of time, she gets over her social awkwardness and ends up having fun.

Finally, there's Barack Obama, the former US president. According to the *New York Times* author Michael D. Shear, Obama spent four or five hours alone almost every night of his presidency. After having dinner with his wife and daughters, he withdrew to his private office, where he worked on speeches, read stacks of briefing papers, and read letters from Americans. But it wasn't all work: Obama indulged in his own version of introvert recharge time by watching ESPN, reading novels, or playing Words With Friends on his iPad. Like other introverts who have been accused of being stuck-up or rude, Obama, too, was criticized for his aloof personality. But it was also his introspective nature and capacity for communication that made him a powerful leader—and that gave him the reputation for having a different style than many on Capitol Hill.

## **Misconception #7: Introverts Don't Know How to Have Fun**

Virginia Miel lives in Mexico, where big and frequent get-togethers are the norm. A quiet introvert, Virginia is often accused by family and friends of not knowing how to have fun. When a friend announced an upcoming birthday party, Virginia swore that this time would be different. She hated how she



always became bored, tired, and irritable at parties. “It was a reminder that being me was ‘wrong’ and that my level of fun was practically nil,” she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article.

But this time, she would be ready. “It took me a whole week to prepare for the party,” she writes. “I did Internet research on different ways to start a conversation. I imagined myself dancing around, talking to strangers, and laughing loudly. I swore I would make myself have fun and be like the rest. I was going to *enjoy* this freaking event.”

When the day of the party arrived, everyone was in their element, but once again, Virginia found herself shrinking back to a corner of the living room. Later in the night, a friend who always seemed to delight in alienating Virginia approached her. “She pointed out to as many people as possible that I wasn’t enjoying myself,” Virginia writes. “I responded that I was but that I don’t enjoy places with this much noise.” Immediately, she regretted saying those words, because they weren’t really true—she wasn’t having fun and it was obvious. Her “friend” remarked cattily that *she* knew how to have a good time. “When I get older,” the friend said, twisting the knife, “I want to remember that I knew how to have fun when I was young.”

Virginia suffers from a common introvert misconception. Extroverts think that if something is fun for them, it should be fun for us, too. Although introverts can and do enjoy the occasional party, we generally have a different definition of fun. Our ideal Saturday night probably involves staying home, snuggled in our pajamas, and watching Netflix while eating takeout. Or maybe online gaming, reading a book, working on our graphic novel, coloring, or composing songs. Or getting dinner with one of our favorite friends and talking about everything that is on our minds.

Virginia doesn’t worry anymore about what people think of her “boring” ways. “I can be as fun as any other person, but in a different way,” she writes. “I love Saturday nights at home. Even if someone invites me to the most amazing party, I will thank that person for the invitation but probably decline. And yes, that’s okay.”

## **In Closing**

I hope you now have a better idea of what introversion is—and perhaps, more important, what it’s not. If someone is surprised to learn that you’re an introvert, it could be because they don’t understand what introversion truly is. Fight those misconceptions. Introverts are not disturbed recluses who hide away in dark bedrooms. Introverts have fun, laugh, and love, too.

## Chapter 4

# YES, THE “INTROVERT HANGOVER” IS REAL

Everyone wanted to talk to Shawna Courter. The newest addition to her fiancé’s family, she was introduced to what felt like hundreds of people, one after the other, in quick succession. As the night wore on, the people around her became louder and more energetic, but Shawna, an introvert, became so exhausted that she could no longer keep a smile on her face. She couldn’t take it anymore. “I slipped away like a thief, skulking about the house, searching for a place where it was quiet,” she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. Eventually, she found that place: a half-lit room, empty except for her future brother-in-law who was sitting alone, staring out the window.

Knowing he was an introvert, too, Shawna figured this was her best option for escape. She sat down on the opposite side of the room, wrapping her arms around her knees. “I remember hoping he wouldn’t think I was intruding upon his own solitude before I allowed myself to zone out, letting my thoughts drown out the raucous laughter from downstairs, breathing deeply and feeling the tension drain away,” she writes. “I don’t know how long it was before my now-husband came looking for me, but I remember him laughing at finding the two introverts seeking refuge together.”

To this day, Shawna and her brother-in-law have not spoken of that night. There’s no need, Shawna figures, because they both inherently understood what the other was experiencing: an “introvert hangover” brought on by too much socializing.

### **“I Become Physically Unwell if I Overextend”**

When Shawna wrote about her experience in an article for *Introvert, Dear* called

“Yes, There Is Such a Thing as an ‘Introvert’ Hangover,” it went practically viral. Major media outlets like *Inc.* magazine and *New York* magazine chimed in, commenting on hangover “symptoms” and exploring the triggers behind this phenomenon. In the latter publication, Jesse Singal describes his version of the introvert hangover in an article in the *Science of Us* section titled “Introvert Hangovers Can Be Really Rough”:

[It’s] more about a general sense of anxiety and impatience. I find it harder and harder to make small talk, and more and more driven to be alone. The mind shutdown resonated, too—it gets harder and harder to fake genuine social interaction (though more so at a party with people I don’t know than when in a small group of people I know and like).

It wasn’t just other writers who weighed in. The comments section of Shawna’s article blew up. “I might need a whole day to myself to recharge after a party, and I really feel like I was hung over: headache, nausea, fatigue, the whole shebang,” one reader comments. Another agrees: “I often need the next day to recover, which is why I try really hard to never schedule two days of socializing back to back.” And: “I definitely become physically unwell if I overextend.”

When Shawna wrote about her experiences, she had no idea she would hit on a topic that resonated so deeply with many introverts. It turns out Shawna was not alone in her introvert hangover. The introvert hangover is real.

## **What an Introvert Hangover Feels Like**

The introvert hangover could also be called “social burnout” or a “social hangover.” No matter what we call it, an introvert hangover can be rough. Some introverts experience physical symptoms. For Shawna, “It starts with an actual physical reaction to overstimulation. Your ears might ring, your eyes start to blur, and you feel like you’re going to hyperventilate. Maybe your palms sweat.”

Also, you may become irritable. This is what happened to Kayla after she spent the day at the Universal Studios theme park with her soon-to-be husband and his family. Even though the outing was fun, she quickly developed an introvert hangover. “I got tired, not just physically tired, but mentally tired, and I got grumpy,” she tells me. “You know how a little kid gets fussy when they need a nap? It’s the same for me. I needed a mental nap!”

On top of that, your mind may shut down. This happens to Brenda Knowles,

an introvert blogger. On her blog *Space2live* found at [BrendaKnowles.com](http://BrendaKnowles.com), in a post called “Introvert Explained: Why We Love You But Need to Get Away From You,” she writes that introverts “are not all recluses hanging out in dusty homes with cats and classic books (not that there’s anything wrong with cats and classic books).” Introverts “get out and rock it,” but then we need to withdraw. “If we don’t, we will feel like an overdone steak—no life, no juice. Our minds will be zapped and cottony. Our speech may come out slowly with pauses between words. There may be tears or swearing, or both.”

Most important, when you experience an introvert hangover, you get an overwhelming desire to be alone. “Contrary to popular belief, we introverts do enjoy socializing,” writes Michaela Chung, creator of the blog *Introvert Spring*. In a post called “Introvert: How to Cure a Social Hangover,” she writes, “We have our playmates and our passions just as extroverts do. Some of us like to dance. Some of us like to drink. Some of us like to flirt, and laugh, and chase sunsets. Some of us have a habit of cramming all of the above into one day. And then, of course, we pay.” When this happens, “you don’t want to talk to anyone. You just want to close the door and be alone for a while. Not for too long—just until the season turns, or reality TV goes out of style.”

Every introvert experiences the introvert hangover a little differently. You may not get sweaty palms like Shawna or feel grouchy like Kayla. You may get an introvert hangover after twenty minutes of socializing or after two days, and it may last for a few minutes or a few hours. Your symptoms and the duration of the hangover will depend on several factors: the social situation itself, your own level of introversion, how much energy you had going into the social event, and the quality of your downtime afterward.



## What Everyone Else Does

Unfortunately, when you have an introvert hangover, your problems don't stop at mental and physical exhaustion. When other people notice you're getting burned out, they often make the situation worse, not better. They ask, "Are you feeling okay?" or "Why are you being so quiet?" They have good intentions; they want you to have a good time at the party or get-together, and they're

worrying that you're not. What they don't know is being called out doesn't help. In fact, it probably just makes you feel self-conscious, which likely results in you doubling down on your "extroverted" efforts. This expends more social energy and ultimately makes your hangover worse.

Worse yet, people accuse you of being a boring party pooper. "Come on, just relax and have a good time." Or, "Don't you know how to have fun?"

An introvert hangover happens because introverts have a less active dopamine reward system than extroverts, as you learned in [Chapter 2](#). If your friends knew you're an introvert who feels drained by socializing, they would probably understand; they might even help you find a quiet place to recharge or not make you feel guilty for wanting to leave early. The problem is, when you're experiencing an introvert hangover, your feelings seem irrational. Everyone around you is having fun—they're not showing signs of social burnout, so why are *you*?

Another problem is, when you feel exhausted and grouchy, the last thing you want is to summon what's left of your energy to give a lengthy explanation. Sure, other people would benefit from knowing about introverts and dopamine, but who wants to give a science lecture when your head is spinning? So you keep your feelings to yourself and end up snapping at others or glowering. You're accused of being no fun. Worst of all, you feel exhausted and unwell.

## **For Extroverts: Recognizing the Signs of an Introvert Hangover**

If you have an introvert in your life, it's important to know the signs of an introvert hangover. Every introvert experiences social burnout in a different way, so they may have symptoms like these, or different ones. Here are general signs to watch for:

- Zoning out, daydreaming, or glazing over
- Becoming quiet
- Irritability, crankiness, grumpiness
- Speaking more slowly and having long pauses between words
- Appearing tired or low in energy
- Getting flustered when having to make decisions
- Feeling physically unwell
- Feeling anxious, down, or depressed

- Wanting to withdraw and be alone

Introverts tend to be highly self-aware, but surprisingly, this doesn't always translate to being aware of our own feelings and bodily sensations. Sometimes we don't recognize when we're getting burned out. Seemingly out of nowhere, we become combative, lethargic, and indecisive. Especially if we're used to overextending ourselves, an introvert hangover may just be our norm. You can do your introvert a favor by noticing when they're getting burned out. Check in with them and see if they need to get away and be alone. Your introvert will appreciate that you're looking out for them.

## The Only Way to Cure an Introvert Hangover

There's only one cure for the introvert hangover. It's the same cure prescribed for actual hangovers induced by alcohol. No, I'm not talking about taking aspirin or eating a greasy burger (but hey, if it soothes your soul, then why not?). The cure I'm talking about is *time*. In the case of the introvert hangover, it's *time spent alone*.

When it comes to solitude, every introvert has a prescription that works for them. Jonathan Rauch, author of the popular *Atlantic* article, "Caring for Your Introvert," has his need boiled down to a precise formula. After an hour or two of being "on" socially, he finds himself fading. That's when he needs to get away from the crowd and recharge. Roughly, for every one hour spent with people, he spends two hours in solitude. To him, this isn't a symptom of depression or "antisocial" behavior. Rather, being alone feeds him on a mental and emotional level, just like eating and resting sustain the body in a physical way.

Not all alone time is the same. You can be "alone" while answering emails in your private office or driving by yourself in rush hour traffic. Your environment may not even be quiet. But this type of alone time probably won't restore your energy. Although there is no one else around, you're not really relaxed. True restorative alone time allows your mind to wander. You stop paying attention to things in the outside world and instead turn inward. You don't think about what's coming next on your schedule or what other people want you to do. You do whatever you want in the moment, whether it's watching a show on Netflix, listening to music, or reading.

Remember Kayla, the introvert who spent the day at Universal Studios with

her soon-to-be in-laws? Although she had an introvert hangover, she couldn't leave the park until the outing was over because the whole family had come together. At one point, when she felt really overloaded, she did something that likely saved the day—she went off on her own for a while. Thankfully, her fiancé (now husband) is an introvert too, so he understood.

One more thing. Alone time doesn't have to be spent completely alone. As Kayla walked through the park, there were swarms of people around her. Nevertheless, she received an energy boost because she got to spend time not *interacting* with anyone. Similarly, for many introverts, downtime with their significant other counts as being “alone.” This is time when you're just hanging out and relaxing, with no real demands on you to act a certain way. You might lounge around the house in your pajamas or read a book on the couch while your significant other sits nearby, playing a video game. Though you're not talking, you're in each other's presence. You're being “alone together.” This can be just as restorative as actually being by yourself.

## **Being Alone Can Be Glorious**

When you have an introvert hangover, finally getting to be alone is a glorious thing. It's quiet! No small talk! No one is demanding anything from you! When I was a teacher, I relished the moments of quiet at the end of the school day when I could finally close my classroom door and be alone. It was even better when I didn't have any plans after school and could go straight home to an empty apartment. On days when I was really overloaded, I would lie on the couch, just staring off into space. Watching Netflix, reading, or listening to a podcast would have been too much mental stimulation at that point. I needed to just *be*.

One of my most vivid memories of being alone was in college. I had signed up to study abroad in Spain for a semester. As a shy introvert who at the time had never lived anywhere else but Minnesota, this was a big step for me. The first two days of the trip were grueling. Traveling from St. Paul to Madrid, I was surrounded by new people twenty-four seven. What made it worse was everyone seemed to become friends with each other instantly—even though they had never met before. While I was trying to soothe my feelings of overstimulation, they were laughing and having fun. I felt simultaneously bombarded by people *and* left out.

When we finally arrived at our hotel, my classmates quickly put together a plan to go bar hopping. One of them invited me. *Here was my chance*, I thought. *I could finally break into their friend group!* But that thought was quickly



replaced with another. I was so exhausted I could barely think straight. I was overwhelmed by so many new things —new people, new food, a new language, and new experiences. I became anxious at the thought of adding one more thing to my already overloaded system.

I didn't go. I just didn't have it in me. I knew staying in meant missing an opportunity to make friends. It also meant I'd have to wait to explore a new city. But I made up my mind that I would have to live with those facts. So I crept back to the hotel room I was sharing with two other women. I crawled into bed, but I didn't fall asleep. Instead, I lay there, relishing the silence and the fact that I was finally alone. Slowly, I could feel my body coming back to life. My mind relaxed, and I started to process all the new things I'd experienced. It was like my thoughts, which had been stuffed away in a jar those last two days, were suddenly released as the jar opened. As my thoughts flew out, I finally made sense of them.

I'd like to say I didn't feel any regret when I saw my classmates the next day, but that wouldn't be true. They were worn out, but they looked closer than ever. They kept referencing things that had happened the night before, and I had no idea what they were talking about. I was left out of their inside jokes. As the trip went on, I never really made it into their inner circle. But ultimately, I believe I did the right thing. Looking back, high-energy people who partied often probably wouldn't have been the right friend "fit" for this low-key introvert, anyway. Plus, the next day, as we toured an art museum, a church, and other places, I actually had the energy to enjoy these experiences.

## **When the Choice of Solitude Isn't Clear**

Introverts have to make difficult choices all the time like the one I made in Madrid. Should we snatch up an opportunity to experience something new, potentially have fun, and make social connections—even though the trade-off is exhaustion and overstimulation? Or should we stay home and protect our energy, but risk missing out? Sometimes the answer isn't clear.

Rachel Ginder is another introvert who had to make a tough decision. During a trip to Europe with about two dozen other twenty-something-year-olds, the group stopped in Germany for Oktoberfest, one of the world's craziest and most renowned parties. As Rachel headed to the festival, she started to worry. She was someone who rarely got tipsy even at home, and her idea of fun was relaxing quietly with a book. But she told herself she was overreacting. She was young and on the trip of a lifetime. Plus, she had forked over a good chunk of her hard-

earned savings to be here. She shouldn't let it go to waste.

As she joined the crushing crowd of Oktoberfest partiers, Rachel felt herself kicking into sensory overload. "The noise was deafening, and I had to nearly scream into the ear of my friend next to me to be heard," she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. "I clung to the sleeve of her shirt so we wouldn't be separated in the throng of people, but I found it nearly impossible to keep my grip as I was jostled on all sides."

It took what felt like hours for Rachel to make it several hundred feet to the closest beer tent. "Even after shoving our way inside where the throng was slightly less dense, I felt agitated, shaky, and a little bit dizzy," she writes. "These were not happy adrenaline-fueled responses." Her gut was telling her to leave.

Rachel had a difficult decision to make. Should she give up on this experience of a lifetime? Or should she tough it out in the hope that she'd eventually have fun? After all, she had *chosen* to come on this trip. She was looking for a little excitement.

In the end, Rachel decided to leave. Another introvert in her group who was also not having fun left with her. Rachel didn't even know the person's name until later that night, but in the chaos of Oktoberfest, their social exhaustion united them. They worked together to find the nearest exit and found their way back to their rooms.

At the hotel, Rachel felt better. However, she also realized that leaving Oktoberfest came with a trade-off. "I would like to tell you I felt empowered by my decision, got a full eight hours of sleep, and had no regrets about my choice for the rest of the trip. Unfortunately, that's not wholly the truth," she writes. "The next morning, my friends were full of stories about dancing on tables and meeting cute guys from foreign countries. Once again, I felt an inner war between the part of me that wishes to be spontaneous and the part that knows that just being in another country was already far beyond my usual comfort zone."

Ultimately, Rachel believes she made the right decision. "For me, it's a big deal to make it through a trip without giving in to exhaustion. In order to make it, I need to say no to certain activities to conserve my mental health, even if part of me wants to say yes just for the experience," she writes. "The struggle might be mental rather than physical, but for me it's no different than refusing a piece of cake that might give me a stomachache, or a liter of Oktoberfest beer that might induce a hangover. No one would judge a person for making decisions based on their physical health, so please don't judge me for attempting to maintain my mental health."

Unfortunately, there aren't any hard-and-fast rules for maintaining your mental health like there are for, say, healthy eating or exercise. Everyone needs to figure out what works for them based on their own levels of introversion or extroversion. "One person's party might be another person's worst nightmare," Rachel writes. "The key is not trying to be wild and spontaneous as someone else understands it, but being wild and spontaneous for who you are as an individual. I'm still finding that balance. The more I test my comfort zone, the closer I come to finding where my boundaries lie. Perhaps next time I might consider dancing on a few tables. Or maybe I'll just dance at home by myself, where the lighting is perfect and the music is at just the right level."

## **Should I Stay or Should I Go?**

Like Rachel's experience in Germany and mine in Spain, the choice between staying in and going out isn't always obvious. Maybe you're not on a once-in-a-lifetime trip but are simply trying to decide whether you should attend a friend's birthday party. You don't want to let your friend down. What if the night ends up being fun, and you miss it? However, if you go, you'll likely become exhausted and overstimulated. Often, we don't really know how an event will affect us until we're there.

My personal rule is if I think I'll be able to tolerate the social drain *and* there seems to be a potential for meaningful interaction, I'll go. If I'm already exhausted—because it's been a long work week or I've already had too many social obligations—I skip it. If the event doesn't promise meaningful interaction, that's another reason to stay home. All of this assumes that it wouldn't be incredibly rude of me to decline, meaning it's not my grandpa's ninetieth birthday party or my best friend's wedding. In cases like those, you probably have to suck it up and make an appearance.

It's not always easy to determine if a get-together promises meaningful interaction. Once, I went to a friend's birthday party that involved a huge group dinner followed by hanging out at a night club, which was also an arcade. Talk about sensory overload—there were flashing lights, crowds, and noise everywhere! Halfway through the night, I ended up meeting a fellow introvert who wasn't sure if he wanted to be there either. We spent the night talking, just the two of us. Later, from a safe distance, we made jokes and sarcastic comments as we watched the crowd writhe on the dance floor. Needless to say, it unexpectedly ended up being a fun, memorable night.

There have been other times when something I thought would be fun didn't

turn out that way. There's just no guarantee how a social event will go. The important thing is to accept that no perfect decision exists. There will be trade-offs no matter what you decide (whether you're an introvert or an extrovert!). Often you have to just make your decision and deal with whatever happens. And if you end up wanting to go home thirty minutes after you arrive, give yourself permission to do just that.

## How to Prevent an Introvert Hangover

Sometimes you really, *really* do want to go to something, even though you're certain you'll get slapped with an introvert hangover. Jax is an introvert who's into cosplay. She faces this conundrum every year when she attends Dragon Con in Atlanta, which is a five-day sci-fi convention that boasts more than seventy thousand people in attendance. "The crowds are unbelievable," Jax tells me. "The partying and panels and contests are non-stop. It can be an emotional meat grinder for even an extrovert."

Thankfully, Jax and her friends have discovered some strategies that allow them to enjoy the conference and avoid introvert hangovers. For starters, they make sure their group has an equal mix of introverts and extroverts. That way, the extroverts always have other extroverts to talk to, and the introverts can find support among their fellow introverts if they need to sidestep the crowd and not talk for a bit. They book several hotel rooms so everyone has a safe, quiet place to retreat to, and they come prepared—they keep Crock-Pots and coolers in their rooms so anyone who needs to escape can relax and make a snack. This also helps them avoid lengthy food lines, which can be torture for a hungry introvert. Most important, when the convention is over, Jax schedules plenty of alone time to recover.

Every introvert has their own tricks for dealing with overstimulation. Here are some more ideas from fellow introverts to help you avoid an introvert hangover, no matter where you are:

- "I always make sure I'm in my own vehicle. I leave once I've had enough."  
—Brandon
- "I always have an escape plan—as in, I will figure out ahead of time what my legitimate excuse is for leaving early. If needed, I will deploy it."  
—Kayla
- "What helps me with events is doing as much advance preparation as possible. If I haven't been to the event site before, I'll google the directions."

I'll iron my outfit the evening before, and I'll give myself plenty of time to get there. Once I decide to attend an event, I'll decide at that point how long I'll stay. I also make sure to get alone time before and after the event."

—Frances

- "I check my phone. It's my companion when I feel like I'm out of place, and it's the best weapon to ignore people around."

—Angge

- "I take mini breaks to people watch. I'm fine being around people if I'm not having to socialize. So if I can find a place to sit and have a drink and just watch people for a little while, it lets me recharge."

—Shannon

- "I take five minute breaks about every twenty minutes. I go where it is completely silent and just soak in the silence."

—Noah

- "I set my phone alarm to sound after one hour of company to remind me to slip away and check in with myself. Preventatively, I take one whole day per week off from the world. I stay at home and avoid overstimulation. It is a sacred day of rest."

—Sunny

- "I focus on finding one person who will talk to me one-on-one."

—Marija

## **In Closing**

Shawna, who first wrote about the introvert hangover, went on to attend more family gatherings with her now-husband's gregarious, if slightly overwhelming, family. "Obviously, I knew that was part of the deal by the time I married him," she writes. But things are getting easier. She now listens to her body's signals and makes her introvert needs clear. "I make my own clear demands for personal time and space," she writes. "Because as introverts, if we want to avoid a hangover, moderation is key."

## Chapter 5

# INTROVERTS AREN'T UNSOCIABLE—WE SOCIALIZE DIFFERENTLY

Introverts don't hate socializing; it's that we do it differently than extroverts. For example, although I avoid big parties like the plague, one of my favorite things is to get dinner with my best friend, a fellow introvert. We talk about everything that's on our minds. Something incredible happens after these conversations; even though I've been socializing for hours, I leave the restaurant feeling energized, not drained. That's because these conversations are “inner world” to “inner world.” My friend and I share reflections, insights, and ideas—the secrets of our mental landscape. The focus is on the internal. Extroverts discuss ideas, too, but the ideas are usually less important than the interaction itself, and they emerge as the conversation takes place. For them, the focus is more external.

In this chapter, we'll explore how introverts socialize differently from extroverts. And if your life is missing that soul-nourishing “inner world” talk, read on. Later in this chapter, I'll give you ideas for starting meaningful conversations and making friends who actually get you.

### **Breadth vs. Depth**

When it comes to friendships, extroverts want the variety of the buffet, whereas introverts want the quality of the chef's special. In other words, the general rule is this: extroverts seek breadth while introverts crave depth. For example, I know two young stand-up comedians with very different temperaments—Misha the extrovert and Austin the introvert. After a show, they both hang out in the lobby

to talk with friends and fans, but they take very different approaches. Misha, full of energy, works the room. He bounces from one person to the next, rarely talking with anyone for more than a few minutes. And because of this, he's the most socially connected person I know. (He invited over three hundred people to his birthday party—he had to rent a theater to hold them all!) Austin, on the other hand, stays mostly in the same location, talking with the few people he's developed a meaningful relationship with. Of course, there are times when these two break their normal patterns of behavior, and Austin can be found going from group to group while Misha talks at length with just one person. But in general, it's breadth vs. depth.

It's not that Austin is a misanthrope. He's a caring, warm person who volunteers as an English instructor. But if he had to switch places with Misha—schmoozing with all those fans—he'd probably find himself succumbing to an introvert hangover.

Like Austin, introverts tend to keep their social circles small because they want to dive deep. Daniel Pinkney, writing on his blog *MisterP.ink*, calls this “all-or-nothing syndrome.” He writes, “In order to develop that degree of closeness, intimacy, and freedom, a lot of time/energy needs to be expended. And therein lies the problem. If I have a friend or partner, I want to be able to give them my all, so anyone outside that small circle usually gets relegated to ‘acquaintances.’ If I can't give my best to any one person, I'd rather not give at all.”

Despite what society might tell you, it's perfectly okay to have just a few close friends. There's nothing wrong with saving the bulk of your energy for the people you truly “click” with. As introverts, we only have so much “people” energy to give. When we invest in a relationship, we want it to be exceptional.

## **It's about Balance**

Introverts keep their social circles small, and that's okay. Just make sure your social circle isn't *zero*. Interestingly, research shows that everyone—both extroverts *and* introverts—can feel happier after socializing. Researcher William Fleeson and his colleagues tracked a group of people every three hours for two weeks, recording what they did and how they felt during each chunk of time. They found that those who'd acted “talkative” and “assertive” were more likely to report feeling positive emotions such as enthusiasm and excitement *in the moment*. It didn't matter whether the subject identified as an introvert or an extrovert; everyone reported a “happiness bump” after acting outgoing.

Does this mean that introverts should rent theaters and throw birthday parties to the tune of three hundred people? Not exactly. Introverts really do get worn out by socializing, and the quality of our interactions matter. But it does mean we need *some* socializing. It's all about balance. We can't party all weekend, but we also shouldn't shut ourselves away in our homes for years à la the poet Emily Dickinson. Find what works for you—dinner with your best friend, writing a thoughtful email to your sister to catch her up on your week, or messaging with online friends. The important thing is to be social on your own terms. You may find that if you initiate the interaction, you'll have more control over it—and ultimately this can help prevent social brain-drain.

## **Rules for Being Friends with an Introvert**

Introverts need friends, too, but let's face it, navigating a friendship can be tricky. You have expectations for how the relationship should go, and so do they—and those expectations don't always match up. That's when feelings turn sour. So in the interest of introverts everywhere and the people who become friends with them, I'm going to lay down some ground rules.

Suggested use: mention these points casually to your friends and talk about which rules resonate with you and which ones don't. Highly discouraged: hanging this section of the book where your friends will see it and handing out citations to rule-breakers like a traffic cop.

Here are fourteen rules for being friends with an introvert:

- 1. If you want to get to know us better, hang out with us one-on-one.** Have you ever wanted to make an introvert disappear? Put them in a large group. They'll quietly fade into the background, and pretty soon it's like they're not even there. But when you get introverts alone, it's a different story. Introverts thrive in more intimate settings because when we're talking to just one person, it drastically reduces our stimulation level; we only have to pay attention to the words, body language, and tone of voice of one person. Plus, during a one-on-one, it's easier to talk about more meaningful things. Group talk tends to revolve around "safe" topics like the news, jokes, and only the parts of your spring break trip to Cancun that are clean enough to tell your grandma. Introverts want to share ideas and talk authentically about things that matter.
- 2. Likewise, if you say it's just going to be the two of us, don't invite other**



**people.** It's a little hurtful if we feel like we're just another warm body in your extrovert entourage. We want to mean something to you, because if we're friends, you mean a lot to us. Plus, we were probably looking forward to talking to just you, and we didn't mentally prepare ourselves to interact with people whom we may not be comfortable with. Before you invite other people, check with us. We might be totally up for it (if we've got the energy) or we might not. Either way, we'll feel like you've respected our preferences.

**3. We'd rather have a tiny moment of real connection than hours of polite chitchat.** How are you *really* ? What's *really* on your mind? Don't just tell us that you had a good weekend. Tell us it was good because you finally sorted out your complicated feelings about your ex. Or that you're having an existential crisis over the fact that you're getting older and that you haven't accomplished the things you thought you would have accomplished by now. We'd rather know what's going on inside you—what's *really* going on—than just see the polished facade that you display to everyone else. How are your ideas, thoughts, and feelings evolving?

**4. Sometimes we need encouragement to open up about ourselves.** As much as introverts enjoy meaningful, authentic conversation, we can struggle to get there. In fact, we tend to keep our thoughts, opinions, and feelings to ourselves, especially around people we don't know well. For example, there have been many times when something was bothering me, and I wanted to talk to someone about it. But because I worried I was inconveniencing the people around me—or I just didn't know what to say to steer the conversation my way—I didn't bring it up. I've gotten better at advocating for myself as I've gotten older, but sometimes it's still hard. If you notice that your new introvert friend looks particularly distracted, maybe there's something that's weighing heavily on their mind that they don't know how to talk about. Try asking them good-natured, non-prying questions. "You don't quite seem like yourself today. Is there something on your mind that you'd want to talk about?" Of course, if they say they don't want to talk about it, don't push too hard. But showing a little interest in us, and directly inviting us to talk, can go a long way.

**5. We may have a hard time confronting you about something.** In the same way that we may struggle to open up, we may also shy away from conflict. This isn't true of all introverts. I know introverts who are just as blunt and

confrontational as some extroverts. But in general, introverts don't like to rock the boat. Remember the study that said introverts saw an angry person's gaze as a threat? It's like that. Angry, harsh words can be overstimulating. And we're likely to brood on hurtful comments, making the matter worse. But if a friend crosses a boundary, they probably won't hear about it right away. We likely won't erupt on the spot (unless it's *really* bad). Rather we'll go home, think about what was said or done, and bring it up a day or two later (or send you an email—it's easier to write our thoughts than speak them).

- 6. We may get lost in our own little world.** The introvert's inner world is vivid and alive. It's as real as the world around us that we can see, smell, touch, taste, and feel. This means we're prone to daydreaming and getting lost in our thoughts. While we're hanging out, if we drift off for a moment, don't say things like "Hey, where did you go?" or "Helloooooo come back to earth!" This will probably make us feel self-conscious. Don't worry, we're just taking a short trip to the realm of our thoughts, and we'll be back with you in a few moments.
- 7. Our silence means we're processing.** Likewise, if we're having a conversation with you and we're quiet for a moment, we're probably thinking about what you said. Give us a beat to collect our thoughts (we like to think before we speak), and then we'll lay some introvert wisdom on you.
- 8. We like talking, too.** I have an extroverted friend who will go on and on about her life if given the chance. Suddenly, twenty minutes have gone by and I've barely said anything. I like to listen and be supportive of her, but even I have my limits, as all introverts do. Please remember that although introverts are good listeners, we still like to talk, too. Unfortunately, many people interpret our silence (and our lack of interrupting) as an invitation to keep talking. Make sure your quiet friend gets their turn, too.
- 9. We may not call or text you as much as your extroverted friends.** That doesn't mean we're not thinking about you. On the contrary, you probably float through our busy mind quite a bit when we're apart. But we know we'll soon see each other again, and we'd rather catch up in a way that's meaningful—in person, over coffee, one-on-one.
- 10. Give us time to mentally prepare to hang out.** Spontaneity can be fun, and

it has its place. But as a general rule, don't text us and ask us to be ready to hang out in ten minutes. We need time to mentally prepare for socializing—even if it's with a close friend. Every introvert is different, but I prefer to be asked to socialize at least a day in advance.

11. **As much as we love you, please don't show up at our house without asking.** Our home is our sacred space where we can (hopefully) quietly recharge. This goes back to the whole “we need to be mentally prepared to see people” thing.
12. **If we don't answer your text, email, or Facebook message right away, don't think we're ignoring you.** We might want to think for a while about how we'll respond. I often read messages and don't answer right away because I want to think of the best way to answer. Or we may be in introvert recharge mode—no people, no messaging, no phone. For our own mental sanity, sometimes we need to completely disconnect from people in every way.
13. **Please know that as much as we had fun hanging out with you yesterday, we probably don't want to hang out again today.** You may feel energized from hanging out the day before, but we feel tired—even if we enjoyed ourselves. Give us some time to be in introvert mode, and we promise, we'll want to see you again soon.
14. **If we say we want to stay home, we really do just want to stay home.** We're not trying to hide from you. We're not sending you the passive-aggressive message that we don't want to be friends anymore. We likely just need some downtime to recharge.

## **If You Want More Friends**

What if you're staying home every weekend not because you need to recharge, but because you don't have anyone to hang out with? Shawna Courter (yes, ironically, the same person who wrote about the introvert hangover) understands this problem. “One of my biggest regrets about the past decade of my life is that I didn't make more of an effort to make friends of my own,” she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. “I got caught up in work, in my marriage, in taking care of my family.” It wasn't until she was packing to move away from her home in Los Angeles that she realized that she hadn't gotten to know many people in the

five plus years she'd lived there. "Why didn't I go out and do more things, meet more people? Honestly, it was because I was afraid," she writes. "I was plagued by *what ifs*. What if I showed up at an event and no one talked to me? What if I said or did something embarrassing? What if, what if, what if ... ? I allowed those fears to stop me."

As Shawna drove across the country to her new home, she realized she didn't want to let fear control her anymore. She challenged herself to step out of her introvert comfort zone and meet more people. She's been in her new city for over two years now, and she feels like she's finally created the kind of life she wants to live.

Finding "your people" is hard. As an adult, where do you go to meet new people? And how do you start a conversation with someone you barely know? Hanging out with people you don't know well can be draining. Also, you don't want to be friends with just anyone—that means the chatty extrovert who parties every weekend probably won't become your BFF. You're looking for a friend who understands you—someone you truly "click" with.

So, what's an introvert to do? Here are nine ideas to help you make friends with people who truly "get" you:

- 1. Think about the people you already know.** You don't have to head to the nearest party or networking event to make new friends. Chances are there are already people in your life whom you'd like to get to know better. Ask yourself, which of your acquaintances seem interesting? Make it a point to talk to these people more.
- 2. It's okay to make the first move.** Many introverts (myself included) are guilty of waiting for other people to come to them. We worry about rejection. "What if I ask her to get coffee after class and she says no?" Or worse, "What if he gets to know me better and he doesn't like who I am?" As Shawna experienced, the process of making new friends can fill a person with self-doubt. And if you're an introvert who has experienced significant rejection (as many of us have), you may feel so discouraged you don't even want to try anymore.

In college, I learned a hard lesson about being passive about making friends. When I moved away from home and left my childhood friends behind, I quickly found myself alone and lonely. I looked around and wondered how everyone had become friends with each other so quickly. Eventually, I realized I wasn't making an effort to get to know anyone. I was skipping social mixers and dorm

events that were designed for freshmen mingling. I saw classes as an opportunity, to, well, *learn* something, when they could have been an opportunity to both learn *and* meet new people. I had wrongly assumed that making friends would just *happen*, without any action on my part. I'm not saying you have to turn yourself into an extrovert—but you can give yourself permission to “go first.”

- 3. Peel off the mask.** Some introverts keep their thoughts and preferences hidden because they worry about others judging them. They don't reveal who they really are, fearing what others may think. But this can lead to having hollow relationships—and becoming friends with people who don't really “get” you. Instead, when you meet someone you want to connect with, be brave and show them who you really are. Say what you really think and feel, even if you worry they'll disagree or won't be able to relate. You can do this bit by bit—it doesn't have to be a flood. And you can do it tactfully. When you peel off the mask, you make yourself vulnerable, and this is how true connection is created.
- 4. Ask questions.** Introverts have a superpower: listening. Ask the other person questions about themselves. What's new in their life? If they could have any career they want, what would it be? Use your powerful listening skills to learn more about them. Plus, when you get them talking, it takes the spotlight off you.
- 5. Notice how you feel.** Do you feel energized after hanging out with your new friend? Or are you so exhausted that you want to hide in your bedroom for days? As an introvert, it's normal to feel tired after spending time with someone new (after all, peeling off the mask takes precious energy). But overall, your friend should make you feel good, not drained. It's okay to listen to your feelings—use them to guide your interactions with your new friend.
- 6. Watch out for potentially toxic relationships.** It's not uncommon for introverts to get stuck in one-sided or toxic relationships. During an interview with me, Adam S. McHugh, author of *Introverts in the Church*, says, “We give people space to express themselves, which is our gift and our curse. People feel safe around us, and share openly with us, because they know we won't interrupt them or compete for attention. We are often content letting other people shape how conversations go.” In other words, when

you're the calm one who listens sympathetically, you can end up on the losing end of a relationship with a toxic person. That's because emotionally needy people usually lack self-awareness—they may not even realize that they're dominating the relationship. They may often try to turn the conversation back to them and their problems, and their pain can become a controlling factor in the friendship.

That's why it's important to set boundaries. If you don't, you may feel like you're losing yourself in unhealthy relationships. "No matter what your temperament, the key to avoiding toxic relationships is a strong sense of self," Adam says. "If you lack that, you will probably find yourself in one-sided relationships with unhealthy people." One of the most helpful changes he has made is making sure that he's not the only one initiating in a relationship. By "initiation," he means not only whether people text or invite him to coffee, but also whether people ask questions about his life and show genuine interest in his responses. "Those are the people worth investing in," he tells me.

**7. Remember that the awkwardness will go away with time.** Introverts tend to keep their best stuff inside—quirky, fun personalities—and only let their true selves out once they feel comfortable around someone. If being with your new friend is somewhat awkward at first, don't beat yourself up. The more you hang out with them, the more comfortable you'll feel. Keep at it.

**8. Plan a regularly scheduled meet-up.** Ask your new friend (and maybe a few others) to hang out once a week. Have brunch every Saturday morning or get a drink after work every Thursday. Having a standing "friend date" means you don't have to exert as much energy to plan something—the details are already taken care of. Plus, routine tends to make us introverts feel more comfortable because then we know what to expect.

**9. Go slowly.** Genuine friendship takes time to develop. If you bow to the pressure to start collecting groupies, you'll likely end up with shallow, unsatisfying relationships that fall apart because there was never a true connection. Allow relationships to develop naturally.

## How to Ditch Small Talk

As an introvert who craves meaningful interaction, this will probably come as no surprise to you: psychologist Matthias Mehl and his team discovered a link

between happiness and substantive conversation. His study, published in the journal *Psychological Science*, involved college students who wore an electronically activated recorder with a microphone on their shirt collar that captured thirty-second snippets of conversation every twelve and a half minutes for four days. Effectively, this created a conversational “diary” of their day. Then, researchers went through the conversations and categorized them as either small talk (talk about the weather, a recent TV show, etc.) or more substantive conversation (talk about philosophy, current affairs, etc.). Researchers were careful not to automatically label certain topics a certain way; for example, if the speakers analyzed a TV show’s characters and their motivations, this conversation was considered substantive. They also found that some conversations didn’t fit neatly into either category; these were discussions that focused on practical matters, like who would take out the trash or what the homework assignment was. Ultimately, the researchers found that about one-third of the college students’ conversations were considered substantive, while one-fifth consisted of small talk. The researchers also studied how happy the participants were, drawing data from life satisfaction reports the college students completed themselves, as well as feedback from people in the students’ lives.

The results: Mehl and his team found that the happiest person in the study had twice as many substantive conversations, and only one-third of the amount of small talk, as the unhappiest person. Almost every other conversation the happiest person had—about 46 percent of the day’s conversations—were substantive. For the unhappiest person, only 22 percent of this person’s conversations were substantive. Similarly, small talk made up only 10 percent of the happiest person’s conversations, while it made up almost three times as much (about 29 percent) of the unhappiest person’s discussions.

Further research is still needed, because it’s not clear whether people *make* themselves happier by having substantive conversations or whether people who are already happy choose to engage in meaningful talk. However, one thing is evident: happiness and meaningful interactions go hand-in-hand. Mehl, in an interview with the *New York Times*, discusses the reasons why he thinks substantive conversations are linked to happiness. For one, humans are driven to create meaning in their lives, and substantive conversations help us do that, he says. Also, human beings—both introvert and extrovert—are social animals who have a real need to connect with others. Substantive conversation connects, whereas small talk doesn’t.

Want to have more substantive conversations? Here are five ideas to help you ditch the small talk.

- 1. Get the other person to tell a story.** Small talk can be boring because we often ask questions that can be answered in just one or two words. For example, “How are you?” (“Fine”) or “How was your day?” (“Pretty good.”) To ditch the small talk, try asking more open-ended questions like, “What was the most interesting thing that happened at work today?” Questions like these invite the other person to tell a story. Here are some more ideas:

Instead of ...

“How are you?”  
“How was your weekend?”  
“Where did you grow up?”  
“What do you do for a living?”

Try ...

“What’s your story?”  
“What was your favorite part of your weekend?”  
“Tell me something interesting about where you grew up.”  
“What drew you to your line of work?”

- 2. Be curious.** As an introvert, you’re probably naturally curious. You wonder how the world works or what makes a person tick. When talking with others, channel your instinctive curiosity. Put yourself in the mind-set of being curious to learn more about the other person. You’ll probably find that you listen more intently, your body language will show that you’re engaged, and you’ll more easily think of questions that move the conversation forward. Plus, being curious about others is a highly attractive quality, and it creates immediate interest and intimacy.
- 3. Ask why instead of what.** This is a twist on asking open-ended questions. Instead of asking about the facts (“what” questions), ask people *why* they made certain decisions. For example, after you’ve asked, “What college did you go to?” follow up with, “Why did you choose that college?”
- 4. Share details about yourself and see what sticks.** This can be hard for introverts, because we tend to dislike talking about ourselves. It puts the spotlight on us, and we may feel exposed. As a result, we get stuck in cycles of mind-numbing small talk in which we don’t reveal anything about ourselves, and in turn, we don’t learn anything meaningful about the other person. This prevents the relationship from growing in a satisfying way.



To avoid this, share a few details about yourself and see what sticks. If you work in an office or go to school, you probably get asked “How are you?” several times a day. Instead of giving the typical response (“I’m fine, how are you?”), expand on your answer and give a few details about your day. You might say something like, “Good, I got up early this morning to get coffee from my favorite coffee shop.” Then, notice how the other person reacts. Do they keep the conversation going by asking a follow-up question (“Nice! What’s your favorite coffee shop?”) or do they give a disinterested nod? If the other person doesn’t seem interested, try revealing another detail about yourself until you hit on a topic that gets the two of you talking. “I had a really hard time with last night’s assignment. I couldn’t figure out what the professor wanted. Did you understand what we’re supposed to do?”

**5. Dare to be honest.** We often sacrifice expressing our true thoughts and feelings for the sake of politeness. But there’s something very authentic, and surprisingly charming, about being completely honest. In *The Irresistible Introvert*, Michaela Chung writes that you can quickly take conversations to a deeper level by saying things like:

- “To be honest, I don’t go to parties very much. I feel pretty overwhelmed being here.”
- “I’m not a big talker, but I like listening.”
- “I don’t like camping. Like, at all.”
- “I’m really proud of that.”
- “This feels awkward.”
- “That hurt my feelings.”
- “No. I don’t want to go. I’d rather stay home and have some me time.”

Be careful to not take this to the extreme. You risk alienating your conversation partner if you overshare or insult. However, if done right, even one authentic disclosure can quickly build intimacy, because honesty draws people in.

## **When Friends Drift Apart**

It can be hard to make meaningful connections. It can be even harder when you lose a close friend. That’s what happened to Maleri Sevier, who became friends with someone unexpected. A fellow classmate in graduate school, her new friend was one of those people whom everyone liked; in Maleri’s own words, she was

“a force in the world.” Maleri, on the other hand, is a quiet introvert. To her surprise, they spent hours together studying, sharing stories, and enjoying deep conversation. Maleri opened up to her in ways she had never expected.

After graduation, the two moved to different cities, and that’s when they drifted apart. During their last conversation, Maleri accused her friend of treating her as though she were not a priority. She admits that she was harsh with her words, but she was desperate to hold onto a relationship that meant so much to her. The two women have not spoken since that argument, and she worries that the friendship is beyond repair.

The loss was extremely painful for Maleri, because it’s not often that she finds someone who truly “gets” her. “In those rare instances when a real friendship develops, and I feel truly understood by the other person, it is nearly impossible to let go of them,” Maleri writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. “Finding someone who is willing to indulge my interests (as obscure as they sometimes are) as freely as I am willing to indulge theirs, is a gift. It is rare to feel so truly accepted.”

Have you ever lost a good friend? You may find yourself ruminating on what happened, feeling like you can’t get your thoughts to change tracks and move on. Maleri writes that she spent hours going over the different scenarios for how things could have gone differently with her friend—but this was not productive because she couldn’t change the past, and brooding drained her energy. Maleri found it helpful to write about her feelings and to talk about the situation with another close friend. Getting her thoughts out of her head helped her to process them better and to break free of the rumination cycle.

If you have recently lost a friendship, you may want to take this time to appreciate your other relationships. While you may not have as deep of a relationship with your other friends, you likely have a group of people around you who love you. “Those friends who were there for me during my friendship grieving process have endeared themselves to me in ways they will never know,” Maleri writes. “The sense of trust their actions have engendered have allowed me to be more open with them and to be more willing to trust them with the deeper parts of my being.”

To prevent a devastating loss from happening again, ask yourself if you’re seeking relationships with reciprocity. Relationships require reciprocity in order for both parties to be fulfilled. If a relationship becomes too one-sided, you may begin to resent one another. Of course, we all go through waves of needing more at certain times in our lives—and these waves are a normal part of life—but if your relationship is constantly out of balance, you may not be as good friends as you think. If you’re always the one initiating contact—setting up times to meet,

sending the first text, etc.—the relationship may be one-sided. Likewise, both parties need to “get something” out of the relationship. This means one person is not doing all the talking, asking for all the favors, or always leaning on the other for emotional support. The amount of “give and take” should be roughly equal.

Finally, recognize that it’s normal to be close to certain friends for a time, even if you drift away later. Often, friendship is born when we have things in common—we attend the same school, work in the same office, or live in the same neighborhood. When we lose our common ground (for example, when you get a different job and no longer see your coworker-turned-friend every day), the friendship may change. You may not have done anything wrong.

Of course, just because your life or your friend’s life is changing doesn’t mean you have to lose the relationship—but you may have to put in extra effort to maintain it. The introverted best friend I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was my college roommate. Today, our lives are very different from the way they were in college, and although we live an hour’s drive away from each other, we meet once a week, in between our two cities, for dinner.

## **In Closing**

Introverts may balk when they get invited to parties. They may wish their friends would stop texting for a while and leave them alone. It’s true that certain types of socializing drain us, but introverts need friends, too. Because of our limited “people” energy, we don’t let just anyone into our lives. But we treasure the relationships we do have. If you’re in our inner circle, know that you’re very special to us.

## Chapter 7

# LET'S BE AWKWARD TOGETHER —DATING FOR INTROVERTS

I walked into the noisy bar and immediately found the face I was looking for. He didn't look quite the same as he did in his dating profile (a little shorter, a little less muscled), but no one ever did. He recognized me right away, too, and I quickly became self-conscious. In what ways did I not measure up to *my* pictures?

He bear-hugged me and smiled warmly. Then came the small talk. "How was your day? What do you like to do for fun? Where did you grow up?" He fired off the questions, one after another, in rapid succession. I tried my best to keep up, answer quickly, and match his level of enthusiasm.

The night went on like this, and soon I became exhausted. My brain was no longer working. I tripped over my words. My sentences came out like molasses.

My date didn't miss a thing. "You've only had one drink!" he laughed when my speech slurred ever so slightly. And that was true. It wasn't the alcohol that was making me dumb. I was on the verge of an introvert hangover. I was overstimulated by his high energy, along with the "newness" of the situation—a bar I had never been to and a person I wasn't yet comfortable with.

Eventually we said an awkward goodbye and left the bar. Soon after I got a text. "It got a little awkward at the end, didn't it? But I know you were tired. Let's get together again this Friday."

Still feeling self-conscious about his "awkward" comment, I flounced into the coffee shop on Friday, wearing a short pink dress. I was determined to be flirty and fun. This guy was everything I wanted, wasn't he? He was creative, interesting, and fun. He was a filmmaker who had built a successful business from scratch. And let's be honest. He was cute. *Really* cute. I wasn't going to let my introvert tendencies sink my chances with him.

We went to a nearby park, hiked around, and got ice cream afterward. I was having a good time, but just like on our first date, social burnout struck. When he dropped me off at my apartment, I bolted from his car and into the quiet solitude of my apartment, where I lay on the couch in silence, recharging.

This went on for several weeks. He wanted to hang out four to five times a week, and always at noisy restaurants, bars, or concerts. “I love being out of the house and *doing* things!” he told me. Often we met right after work, and our dates stretched well into the evening. Then I had to get up early the next morning for work and do it all over again. Each time we got together, I was always the one to call it quits and head home because I was tired. He started to tease that I “didn’t know how to have a good time.” Once, I got him to agree to a low-key dinner date at home, but he acted bored, as if he was just doing it to oblige me.

The relationship lasted for about two months before it fizzled out. In retrospect, I was never my best self on those dates because I was almost always overstimulated. The way my mind and body reacted on our first few dates should have been a clue to me that as much as I liked the idea of a relationship with him, it wasn’t right. I needed someone who would not just tolerate a night in but relish it. Someone who would understand that we don’t need to chatter constantly to stay connected. Someone whose words and presence would energize me, not drain me.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that introverts and extroverts shouldn’t be in relationships together. I’ve dated some extroverts, whose company I really enjoyed. I chose to share this story with you because it taught me a lesson I’ll never forget: whether introvert or extrovert, the right person for me is someone I feel good being around.

If you’re a single introvert who is dating, you hold a special place in my heart because I know what you’re going through. I’ve suffered years of awkward first dates, flings that went nowhere, unrequited love, and serious heartbreak. On one hand, being single and dating was one of the most exhilarating and personally meaningful times of my life. I found myself growing and changing in ways I had never imagined as I met new people and had new experiences. But on the other hand, it was simultaneously the loneliest, most difficult period of my life. I worried that my introversion held me back. That I was too weird or quirky to be loved. That my high standards meant I’d be forever alone.

Many of the introverts I talked to when writing this chapter felt the same way. They worried that their introversion was more of a liability than an asset when it came to the dating game. If that’s you, read on. You don’t have to change who you are to find Mr. or Mrs. Right.

## What Introverts Want in a Partner

What gets introverts going? To find out, I asked introverts to describe the qualities they want in a partner. I got over two hundred answers, and the responses were as unique as the introverts who gave them. But there were a few things I heard over and over. Introverts want someone who ...

- Can hold a meaningful conversation with them
- Listens
- Respects their need for alone time
- Understands them and appreciates their quirks
- Is intelligent (a “meeting of the minds”)

Here is what some of them said, in their own words:

“After being single for nearly three years following the very painful end of a marriage, I’m starting to feel ready to date again. I’ve dipped my toe into the online dating pool, though I am not particularly hopeful that I will find someone who can truly understand and appreciate me. The first time around, I feel like I had to present a certain side of myself—the more extroverted, spontaneous side—which is me about 25 percent of the time with lots of recharge time in between. My fantasy is to be with someone who can bring out that side of me while also respecting and cherishing my sensitivity and need for quiet and solitude.”

—Claire

“I find myself being attracted to introverts. One reason is that introverts tend to have a calm energy, a peaceful core that is in sync with my energy. Some extroverts, when I’m around them, seem to have a more restless energy that runs counter to mine. Being around that kind of energy always makes me feel like I’m swimming against it as opposed to flowing with it. If you’re an extroverted friend, I can handle it for however long we hang out. But having a potential partner possess that restless, extroverted energy might be too much for me to handle. Too much friction. Also, so much of what I value most about life is connected to my introversion: reading, writing, ruminating about various philosophical ideas, preferring a few close friends over many acquaintances—all seem rooted to the essence of who I am. And being with someone who doesn’t get any of that and is the complete opposite would be difficult. That being said, I

don't want a carbon copy of myself—that would get boring. I want someone to bring me out of my shell and expose me to new ideas and experiences. And certainly, extroverts can enjoy reading, writing, and other seemingly introvert-oriented activities. So I suppose it's just about finding the best match for you.”

—Justin

“I'm all about inner qualities. I'm not focused on outward appearance. Since my focus is predominantly inward, I found someone who understands the mystery of my inner world. He has replaced what used to be my alone time with what I now crave instead—‘us’ time. I can be myself and not hide any of my introversion.”

—Angelica

“I like deep thinkers. Someone whom I could have a next-level conversation with and who would not find it awkward.”

—Taha

“Someone who puts in genuine effort into the relationship. Effort means a lot.”

—Dean

“Kindness, above all. People who care deeply—about others, about their principles—are the most attractive people to me.”

—Jessa

What qualities are on your list? If you're looking for a long-term partner, take a moment to think about what your significant other is like. But don't focus too much on qualities like *sense of humor*, *likes to travel*, and *is at least five-foot-eight*. Instead, put qualities like emotional stability, integrity, empathy, reliability, and agreeableness at the top of your list. Why? Because research suggests that the most happily married people are those who, regardless of what they *think* they want in a partner, simply end up with spouses who have excellent personality traits. In the long run, it may not matter that your date is carrying a few extra pounds or doesn't share your obsession with K-pop. If they're stable and cooperative, there's a good chance you'll be happy with your relationship decades later.

## **Why Dating Can Be Hard for Introverts**

No matter what qualities you're attracted to, dating can be hard. And it's hard whether you're an introvert, extrovert, or whatever-vert. How do you meet

people? What do you say? And what if you get rejected? Introverts face particular challenges when it comes to dating. For one, we probably don't put ourselves out there as much as extroverts. Most nights, we'd rather relax at home or hang out with just a few close friends. When we do go out, we don't have a huge desire to strike up conversations with strangers. Awkward small talk coupled with the fear of rejection? No thanks, I'll just get three more cats and be alone forever.

If you're an introverted woman, you face your own set of problems. The biggest one is that you probably don't fit gender stereotypes. Television and movies tell us that women are supposed to be flirty, forward, and fun. Think Rachel from *Friends* and Gloria from *Modern Family*. These women are the embodiment of extroverted charm. They chat, they flirt, and, because it's TV, they look amazing while they do it. Comparing yourself to extroverts like these, you may feel less desirable and confident.

Likewise, if you're an introverted man, you may struggle with our society's expectation that you're supposed to make the first move. I interviewed Steven Zawila, who writes a dating advice blog for introverted men called *Charming Introvert*, and he says this is probably the biggest hurdle introverted men face. "We may struggle with being confident," he tells me. "We're expected to be the initiators throughout most of the relationship. It's up to us to ask her out the first time, to go for the first kiss, to ask her to be exclusive, to say the first 'I love you,' and so on. This can be terrifying because it means risking social rejection by someone whom you really care about."

If you're LGBTQ, you may face the above problems plus additional ones. For one, you may have a harder time than extroverts talking about your sexuality. Justin, who is gay, says he is private and tends to internalize everything. As a result, he wasn't open about his sexuality when he was younger. "I tend to overthink and overanalyze everything, and when I was younger, being gay was just one more thing I had to figure out and come to terms with on my own," he tells me. "And while that teaches resiliency, sometimes it's helpful to have another voice weigh in. Especially when yours is self-critical. So while I thought about myself and who I was all the time, I didn't always approve of the conclusions I arrived at. Maybe if I was less introverted and less introspective, and just more outgoing, social, and extroverted by nature, I would have found a friend I could confide in a lot sooner than I did."

Part of the problem was he didn't want to call attention to himself. "I knew this gay thing would make me the center of attention," he says. "So I kept it as buried as I could until I couldn't any longer. Being reflective, daydream-y, and introspective are admirable qualities, but when there's something toxic brewing



within you, like the self-hatred that brewed in me, sometimes you have to expunge it and open up to someone else. That's not easy to do when you're an introverted kid already taught to hate yourself for who you are: a shy, quiet loner who clams up in front of strangers and prefers reading alone than playing basketball with the other boys." Even today, Justin, who is in his thirties, is choosy about who sees that side of him. "Though I'm not in the closest, I don't willingly discuss my sexuality except with close friends," he says.

Finally, no matter whom you love, you might know what this feels like: Everyone keeps telling you to try online dating, but you're hesitant because it feels inauthentic. You have an aversion to the superficial social interaction that it is sometimes characterized by. "I see online dating sort of like networking for a job," Justin says. "There's so much pressure to put your 'best self' forward and to be outgoing, smart, funny, *etc.* For an introvert like me who craves authenticity in social interactions and only feels connected to people when we're talking about our deepest dreams, hopes, and fears, there's something that rings hollow about online dating."

## **Are Introverts Too Picky?**

Kate is twenty-nine years old and has never been in a serious relationship. "I meet people and realize they're just a little off from what I need," she says. So far, she's only ever met one guy who she really felt could be what she wanted—and, of course, he already had a girlfriend! "My family has told me many times that I'm too picky, but my best friend was able to put it another way: 'It's like you're looking for a thumbprint, and you'll just have to keep looking until you find the one that's just right.' Someday I'll find the right one."

Kat is another single introvert who is looking for a partner. She's picky—and she knows it. "Because when I was not, I ended up exhausted and unhappy," she tells me. But she's starting to doubt that she'll ever meet the right person. "It has been five years and I haven't met anyone I'm interested in. There are plenty of men out there but none have sparked me." Kat, who is in her thirties, says it's kind of painful to see everyone else coupling up and settling down. "So occasionally I have self-pity sessions, and I do not appreciate being different," she says. "However, I cannot settle for something that does not feel right. Only time will tell."

Have you ever been told that you're too picky about who you're willing to date? That you'll never find someone who lives up to your high standards? If so, here's some good news: Being selective about who you get into a relationship

with can be a *good* thing, according to psychologist Rom Brafman. When you're picky, you avoid settling for someone who may not be right for you.

When people settle, they usually do it for one (or all) of the following reasons, writes Brafman in a *Psychology Today* blog post:

- Loneliness: "I want someone special in my life, and I'm tired of spending so much time alone."
- Time pressure: "Everyone else is getting married and starting a family—I'm running out of time!"
- Opportunity cost: "If I break up with him/her, I may never find someone better."

Each of these reasons is not a good rationale to date someone, because they're all based in fear. And when you begin making decisions from a place of fear, it's no longer about *who* you're dating but rather what you *stand to lose*. When you approach dating with a fear mind-set, you snatch up anybody who's interested in you, regardless of how compatible they are with you. I've been guilty of this. It's like drinking curdled milk because you're desperate for anything to quench your thirst.

Dating shouldn't be about finding someone who's going to "work." Instead, it should be about finding someone who mesmerizes you. Someone who excites you. Someone who you don't have to convince yourself to go out with. Being picky forces you to value yourself. It takes time and patience to find the right match, but it's one of those times when it's really worth the wait.

Debbie is an introvert who heard the "you're too picky" line over and over. "My friends always told me I would end up alone if I didn't give these 'good guys' a proper chance," she tells me. "I just couldn't get myself to settle even though I knew they were great guys." Even when she was lonely, she believed there was someone out there for her. "And thank God I did not settle because I found him, or rather he found me," she says. "He understands me completely even though he's an extrovert, and he accepts me completely." Now, happily in a relationship, Debbie has some encouraging words for other introverts who've been accused of being too picky. "I assure you, you are not being unreasonable," she says. "What you're looking for is not unobtainable."

## **A Caveat to Being Picky**

I'd like to add one caveat to the "being picky is a good thing" idea. If you

haven't done much dating—for whatever reason—consider this strategy: you could lower your pickiness shield for a time and go on a date with anyone you're even mildly interested in. That cute guy at your friend's birthday party who wants your phone number? Sure, why not. The attractive woman in your class who asked you to get coffee? It couldn't hurt. You can give anyone a first or second date—but you don't have to give them a third.

There's an important thing you have to do while on the date. Don't mess up this part. (I've messed this up and allowed relationships I just wasn't that into to continue for too long.) While on the date, notice how you feel around the other person. How does your mind, heart, and body react to them? Do they drain or energize you? Does your mind bubble with interesting ideas when the two of you talk, or are you bored? Are you physically attracted to them? Use your introvert superpowers to reflect on and analyze the date. Don't ignore the feedback you're getting from your emotions and body. Ironically, we introverts can be both highly introspective and hyper-tuned in to the people around us, but we can have a harder time discerning our own preferences and feelings—until we make a conscious effort to do so.

If someone doesn't excite you, don't keep going on dates with them. After enough dates with a variety of people, you'll find yourself becoming an expert on what you want and don't want in a partner. Better yet, you'll become an expert on *you*.

And there's a bonus: going on dates can help improve your social skills. You can treat each date as an opportunity to learn more about how these crazy creatures we call human beings work. See each date as a mini-workshop to refine your social prowess. For example, you might practice strategies to tame your pre-date anxiety, learn how to talk about yourself more comfortably, and figure out how to keep the conversation going by asking interesting questions. At the end of each date, ask yourself, "What could I have done to make the date even better?" Don't go overboard with analysis, but tap into your natural desire to improve and optimize things.

Remember how I wrote at the beginning of this chapter that dating was a time of personal growth for me? That's because I used this strategy. There were a lot of horrible, awkward date fails at the beginning of my dating "career." But as I added more experience to my dating resume, I found myself becoming more in tune with myself—and my dating game drastically improved.

When you feel you've gotten a better picture of the kind of partner you want to be with, raise your pickiness shield again. Start saying yes only to people whom you could really see yourself being with long-term. At this stage, you may have to pass over a lot of people—just be patient.

## **When You Get Too Attached Too Fast**

Liz is an introvert who doesn't do casual. "If I don't have a great time with someone immediately, I move on," she tells me. "But there have been a few guys whom I really liked, but I become 'too much,' and I think I scared them off. Maybe I get too hopeful?" Liz was in a "dysfunctional but super connected relationship" for nine years. It ended about a year ago, and since then she's dated a few people but none have stuck. "I wish I could just 'keep things light' as people tell me and not get attached so quickly. Maybe it's because I know that connection doesn't come very often." She's getting to the point where she wants to give up and stop putting herself out there. "It's lonely, but at least I don't get hurt or disappointed."

Liz isn't alone. Many introverts have told me that they're just not into one-night stands, hookups, and flings. Casual seems too superficial, too meaningless. When they finally do find someone they're into—physically and emotionally—they fall hard and fast.

It isn't a bad thing to take dating seriously, especially if you're looking for a partner to settle down with. Everyone has to make their own call about whether one-night stands and hookups are right for them. (This is a judgement-free zone, no matter what side of the fence you're on.) Personally, I completely understand what Liz means about getting attached too fast, because I've been there, too. Once, I met someone whom I fell for almost immediately. Our eyes locked across a crowded room, just like in a movie. He was sitting at a table alone, looking tantalizingly introspective. What followed was a deep, meaningful conversation that lasted well into the night. Finally, someone who got me! It was the first time I'd ever felt such a strong connection with someone, so my thoughts became obsessive. All I could think about was him—even though I barely knew him. I know now that my fantasizing clouded my judgement, and I failed to see that he was not the right person for me. We had a strong emotional connection, but to be blunt, he was flaky and unstable. Even though he wasn't the partner I really needed, when our relationship fizzled out, I was crushed.

If you find yourself becoming obsessed with someone you barely know, proceed with caution. It's easy for introverts to idealize a potential love interest. Because we're so in our heads, we can be in danger of filling in the gaps with our imagination and become quickly attached to something that isn't even real.

## **When You Put Someone on a Pedestal**

Something similar happened to Steven Zawila of the blog *Charming Introvert* a few years ago. He had a crush on a woman—let's call her Joyce. “She was stunningly gorgeous, and I really liked her,” he writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. “She was always really friendly toward me.” So Steven began to imagine the two of them together. He fantasized about being in a relationship with Joyce and having her as his girlfriend. “If I saw her and was able to talk to her, it made my whole day,” he writes. “And if I went a few days without even seeing her, I became depressed—sometimes to the point of having trouble eating.”

This went on for weeks, then months, and then over a year. “They say there are ‘plenty of fish in the sea,’ but I didn’t want to hear it,” he writes. In the whole time he obsessed over her, Steven didn’t try to ask her out even once. “I knew that if I asked her out, there was a chance she would say no. And that would be impossible to deal with, especially after months and months of having become obsessed with her. It was easier for me to live in my fantasy world where the two of us were together than to face the reality that she may not actually want that.”

Then one day, Steven learned that Joyce was moving away and that he’d probably never see her again. He finally decided to ask her out. “By that time, my expectations had become so high that there was no possible way she was going to live up to them,” he writes. “I had put her on a pedestal, and no woman wants that. She said no and, naturally, I was crestfallen. That night I shut myself up in my apartment, and I cried myself to sleep.”

Eventually Steven got over it, but that one rejection was a very tough pill for him to swallow. For months, he had pinned all his hopes on a single woman, which made him desperate around her. “Don’t do what I did,” he writes. “Don’t put her on a pedestal.”

## **For Extroverts: What You Should Know about Dating an Introvert**

Are you an extrovert who is interested in dating an introvert? Here are some things about us that you should know:

**We take things slowly.** If extroverts are the hares, then introverts are the tortoises. Introverts tend to open up to new people more slowly than extroverts. We may not make a move as quickly (i.e., ask you out or get physical right away). Also, we may reach relationship milestones more slowly (i.e., saying “I love you” for the first time or proposing). That’s

because we like to think things through and carefully consider all aspects of a situation before we make a decision. We need time to process our experiences and reflect. Relationships are no exception.

**We may have trouble talking about ourselves.** Seriously. If we're on a date with you, especially a first or second date, we may stutter and fumble for words when you ask us about ourselves. Introverts are like onions—our personality has many layers, and it takes a while to discover them all, especially the hidden layers closest to the core. We're private, and we won't reveal the most personal parts of us until we fully trust you.

**Want to truly connect with us? Talk about ideas or other meaningful topics.** When the time is right, try asking some questions to take the conversation deeper. "What in your life are you most proud of?" "Do you have a dream or goal that you've never shared or thought was possible?" "Have you ever read a book that changed you?" Your introvert will probably light up.

**We flirt differently.** Think subtle moves, not bold. We might give you a sly smile. A gaze that lingers. Listening intensely and asking thoughtful questions. Revealing our secret inner world to you. What we probably won't do: aggressively hit on you or make overtly sexual remarks.

## But I Don't Wanna Leave My House

Every time I see this meme on Facebook, I laugh. It says: "I found out why I'm still single. Apparently you have to go outside and let people see you." It gets a lot of likes and shares because there's some truth to it: it can be hard for introverts to meet potential partners because we don't socialize as much. How do you meet people when you don't want to hang out in noisy bars and crowded clubs? The good news is you don't have to. I mean, you'll probably still have to *go to places* and *talk to people*. But you can do this in a way that's more your style. Here are three ideas to help you meet potential dates:

- 1. Through your hobbies.** Pick an activity you enjoy or you would like to try. Then find a place where there are other people doing that activity. For example, if you've always wanted to learn to cook, take a cooking class. Or maybe you're the kind of person who loves helping people—so try

volunteering ([VolunteerMatch.org](https://www.volunteermatch.org) is a great way to find volunteering opportunities in your area). The people you meet at these events already share a common interest with you, so it will be easier to have conversations. People are more receptive to talking with a stranger at meet-ups than they are at a bar.

2. **Through your friends.** Ask your friends if they know anyone you might be interested in. Keep in mind that extroverts, by definition, love to surround themselves with people and tend to be very connected. If you have an extroverted friend, they may have several acquaintances whom you've never met. Having a "warm" connection helps break the ice and allows you to skip a lot of the initial awkwardness at the beginning of a relationship.
3. **Give online dating a chance.** I know, I know. Your friends and family have already told you this. And swiping through profiles feels more like shopping than falling in love. But online dating offers some advantages to introverts. It allows you to filter people based on their interests and personality type before you talk to them. And you can do it from the comfort of your own bedroom. Introverts, rejoice!

## But I Don't Know What to Say

Like many introverts, Steven struggled with talking to the people he was interested in. "As introverts, we face a lot of pressure to be more like extroverts," he writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. "Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet*, calls this the 'extrovert ideal.' For a long time, I always thought that something was wrong with me because of my introverted qualities and that women would never find me attractive. After all, one of my friends who I always saw getting dates had the opposite personality as I did. He loves to surround himself with people all the time. When he talks to women, he is very aggressive and makes the conversation overtly sexual very quickly."

That's not Steven's style at all. He describes himself as introverted, reserved, and gentle. "After watching my friend succeed seemingly all the time while talking to women, I started to become afraid that I would have to change my personality to be more like his if I ever wanted to get a girlfriend." For a while, he tried to behave more like his friend. However, he didn't get anywhere even though he was doing the same things his friend was. "I also started to feel like I an actor by going against my own personality," he writes.

What was Steven doing wrong? He quickly found out. “Women could sense that I was being inauthentic—and they were turned off by it.” Here are three ideas from Steven you can consider so this doesn’t happen to you:

- 1. Be your best authentic self.** Or, in other words, be the version of yourself that your friends and loved ones enjoy being around. How do you behave around the people you are comfortable with, and what is it that they like about you? Try to be this person when you’re talking to a potential romantic interest.
- 2. Listen for what the other person is interested in.** Becoming a good conversationalist involves talking in terms of the other person’s interests and listening to them when they talk about themselves. This shows you’re interested in your date’s values, experiences, and beliefs. You’re interested in who they are as a person. And listening is something introverts often excel at. Try to find something that your date would enjoy telling you about. Remember to ask open-ended or “why” questions.
- 3. Talk about the things that make you interesting.** If the other person is interested in you, they would enjoy learning more about you, too, and about what gets you excited. Are they asking you open-ended questions about yourself? This basically means, “I want to learn more about you.” Tell them what makes you an interesting person. Do you have an awesome job? An adventurous story? Have you read something unusual recently? Introverts typically don’t like talking about themselves, but this is one time when you’ll have to push yourself out of your comfort zone a bit. You don’t have to tell them your entire life story or reveal intimate, embarrassing details. But you should tell them enough to give them a sense of who you are.

## **Don’t Fake Being an Extrovert**

As you talk to people you’re interested in, it’s okay to be friendly. It’s even okay to step a bit outside your comfort zone and push the limits of your gregariousness. But be careful not to manufacture too much of an extroverted persona. Although it might be tempting to fake being more social than you really are when you’re trying to attract a love match, eventually this approach will backfire. You may find yourself involved with someone who would have preferred being involved with an extrovert—and feels tricked into a mismatched relationship. Later on, you may find yourself resenting your partner’s



expectation to go, go, go, and talk, talk, talk.



Be yourself, and don't hide the fact that you're an introvert. People are drawn to others who are comfortable in their own skin. You may not be everyone's cup of tea, but that's okay. In the end, it will pay off because you'll attract someone who is interested in the real you.

## How to Be Quietly Intriguing

You don't have to act like an extrovert to attract others; introverts can be intriguing in their own way. Here are some ideas from Michaela Chung, author of *The Irresistible Introvert*, to harness your quiet charisma:

- Express yourself authentically. Say what you really think and feel. Some introverts are afraid to say what's on their mind, so they stick to "safe" topics, never really revealing things that allow other people to get to know them better. Authentic expression provides opportunities for connection with the right people.
- When it comes to expression, a little goes a long way. "Luckily for introverts, this is one of those instances where less is more," Michaela writes. "We don't have to be over the top for others to take notice. In fact, our calm demeanor makes any form of expression that much more intriguing. I know a lot of people who go around expressing every passing thought and emotion. After a while, nothing stands out. All the words and revelations melt together like a really long run-on sentence."
- Own whatever state you're in. Let's say you are at a party and are tired of conversing. Try politely excusing yourself and stealing a few moments of solitude. As you perch on top of an overstuffed ottoman, watching the room and taking a voluntary time-out, something interesting happens. People become curious about you. They wonder, *Who is this person? What are they thinking about?* Michaela calls this the "power of the push." When you don't do what people expect of you, it creates intrigue.
- Own the room. Imagine that you're in a place you feel comfortable being in, like your own home. Notice how your body language, words, and posture changes.
- Stay present. Introverts' minds tend to leave the present moment and go wandering. This puts a vacant look on our faces, and people know we're not with them. To be more present, try to experience the moment through your senses. Delight in the smell, feel, look, and taste of what is happening right now. When your mind starts to wander, bring it back to the sensations of the moment.

## **Will I Ever Find Love?**

As I spoke with introverts about dating and love, again and again I heard things like this:

“I’m ready to give up that love will find me.”

“I can see finding myself at the end of my life, offering the same explanation for never successfully marrying that author Louisa May Alcott did: ‘I never managed to fall in love.’ ”

“All I can seem to manage are unrequited loves for me or from me, but never with the same person at the same time.”

“In the past two years, I have not meet anyone who I have been the least bit interested in.”

“What kind of patience do I need to still believe that I will find that someone?”

Being a single introvert looking for love is hard. Every day, you may doubt yourself. Every day, you may feel alone. You worry that there isn’t anyone out there for you. People tell you, “Don’t worry; it will happen.” But you’re pretty sure it won’t.

What you’re feeling is real, and it’s perfectly okay to feel that way. I felt that way for many years. Eventually I figured if love was going to find me, it would; but if it didn’t, I would have to be okay with that (spoiler alert: it did). I’m not going to try to talk you out of your feelings. But I do want to share Becky’s words with you, in the hope that, one day, the same will be true for you. Becky tells me, “I’m an introverted, intellectual, unemotional, cynical woman, which makes it very hard to find a complementary match. I need someone who is extroverted enough to help me do the talking and occasionally go outside my comfort zone, but not so extroverted that I get burnt out on social activities. I need someone who is intellectual enough to sustain my interest long-term and who won’t be intimidated by my brain or the way I talk. Someone who is emotional enough to take the lead and share his feelings so that I’m comfortable sharing mine, which is hard to find in a male. Someone who will embrace my cynicism, but also counter it with positivity to keep us balanced.”

Becky used to think a person like this couldn’t exist. “But I did find one, and he even came with a dozen extra ‘nice-to-haves,’ ” she says. “Before him, I found dating frustrating and unfair. It seemed like nothing would ever work out. At times, I became so desperate that I poured time and energy into a clearly dead-end relationship that didn’t even make me happy. But now I’m so glad that I went through all that to find him at the end of it. Being alone is not always glamorous, but finding a real connection is worth it.” She has some advice for

introverts looking for love: “Follow your heart, listen to your brain, and it will all be okay.”

## **In Closing**

I’m happily in a committed relationship now. Like Becky, after years of dating, I tripped across a fellow introvert who had all the same fears about his relationship fate that I had. After late-night phone conversations that I never wanted to end and a dinner date in my apartment, I finally felt understood by another human being, and a real relationship was within my reach. The rest was history. I wish the same for you, too.

## Chapter 8

# LET'S BE QUIET TOGETHER— INTROVERTS IN RELATIONSHIPS

Alex Lidnin immediately regretted her decision to sign up for the accelerated geology course. All around her, people were introducing themselves and, in her mind, forging friendships that would earn them reputations like “Easily My Favorite Student” or “The Cool Guy Who Can Talk to Anyone.” “I remember the moment I realized a summer camping trip (also known as an easy credit class) might rank as one of the worst decisions I’ve ever made,” Alex writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article.

Those two weeks were some of the most disparaging times of her college career. “I was essentially trapped twenty-four hours a day with fifteen people who hiked, camped, bathed, cooked, and most importantly *talked* with me,” she writes. Despite being terrified at the time, years later, she says she’s forgotten most of the awkward encounters that she’s pretty sure were only awkward in her mind. “At least that’s what I tell myself when memories of the most embarrassing ones keep me awake at 3 a.m.”

Then, one night, something happened that changed her life. She was sitting near the campfire, trying to ignore the people around her and read, when someone sat in the chair next to her. “I reread the same paragraph over and over and my mind argued with itself about who was being ruder: me, for not putting down my book, or him, for thinking I would do so,” Alex writes. Eventually, for reasons still unknown to her, she put down her book and started talking to her classmate. They ended up talking all night—as the sun set, as the fire died, and as, all around them, people returned to their tents. He was an extrovert, so Alex found it easy to hold a conversation with him. “Movies, music, books, anything—I only had to mention a topic I enjoyed and he would fill in the remaining space with excited words I could never seem to string together out loud.” As the

night went on, Alex found herself growing comfortable with “his loud but almost comically kind opinions on everything.” When the only voices in the campsite were theirs, they walked to the river and talked until it became absolutely clear they would fall asleep right there if they didn’t stop talking and go to bed.

Five years later, Alex and that extrovert are engaged. “Our home, our cat, our life—all of it built on the mutual understanding that I probably won’t put my book down every time he wants attention,” she writes. “But if he waits long enough, I’ll think of something to say.”

Alex will always be thankful for the extrovert who interrupted her reading. She wouldn’t have signed up for that summer course if she had known how much interacting with other students she would have to do. But if she hadn’t, she would still be going to concerts alone, wondering if there was anyone out there who shared her “insanely specific tastes.” “Like so many of life’s struggles, though, I made it through and maybe even came out on the other side with a little more strength and fight in me,” she writes. “I’ll forever be grateful to myself for trying something I didn’t know I would succeed at, but mostly, I’m grateful to my extroverted fiancé who sat next to the shy girl in class and just waited for her to speak.”

Like Alex, many introverts meet their special someone when they are tottering on the edge of their comfort zone. And like Alex, they realize that enduring the stomach-knotting, heart-pounding awkwardness ends up being totally worth it in the end. This chapter will explore the different stages of introverts in relationships. We’ll explore why introverts make amazing partners and answer this question: Should introverts be with a fellow introvert or with an exuberant extrovert? The answer may surprise you.

## **Why Introverts Make Amazing Partners**

Introverts are often stereotyped as closed, withdrawn, and even dull. This doesn’t sound like it spells passion and romance, right? In truth, introverts can make amazing partners. We bring a lot of strengths to the table. For one, we tend to be excellent listeners. At our best, we try to understand what our partner is saying, and we think about where they’re coming from before we respond. This can be helpful, because once words are spoken, they can’t be retracted or easily forgotten, *if at all*. Introverts truly understand the power of words—including well-placed moments of silence.

Because we’re often comfortable listening and observing in social situations,

we're okay with giving our partner the stage. This relationship superpower is especially valuable if our significant other is an extrovert. While our partner holds court, we won't feel compelled to wrestle attention away from them.

The list goes on. Introverts can create homes that become sacred spaces to recharge, and we may have a calming influence on our partners. And you know that “meaningful interaction” thing? Being in a relationship with an introvert means you may experience more depth and intimacy than you ever have before. We're curious creatures. We like to dig deep and really figure out what makes people (or things) tick—and we'll likely apply our natural curiosity to *you*. Like an eager scientist studying a once-in-a-lifetime subject, we'll work to decipher your preferences, likes, and dislikes. You may feel more known, seen, and understood than ever before.

Finally, we may be the most low-maintenance partner you've ever had. We don't want or need attention twenty-four seven. When you love an introvert, you gain the freedom and space to be yourself.

## **Introvert vs. Extrovert, by the Numbers**

Introverts can make amazing partners. But should they be with a fellow introvert or an exuberant extrovert? In other words, are you happier when birds of a feather flock together, or do opposites attract? To find out, I put together a survey and asked my Twitter followers to respond. I asked introverts if they were currently in a relationship with a fellow introvert or an extrovert (or in no relationship). I received 770 responses. The results were:

In a relationship with another introvert—27 percent (208 respondents)

In a relationship with an extrovert—26 percent (200 respondents)

Not currently in a relationship—47 percent (362 respondents)

As you can see, about half of the introverts in a relationship were with another introvert and about half were with an extrovert. Also, almost half were *not* currently in a relationship (47 percent are single vs. the 53 percent that are in relationships).

Then I wondered about how happy introverts are in these relationships, so I created a more formal survey. I asked introverts in relationships to rate their happiness level from 1 to 5, with 1 being “Miserable” and 5 being “Amazing! I couldn't be happier.” I also asked them to identify whether they were in a

relationship with an introvert or extrovert. What would you predict? Would you hypothesize that introverts are happier with a quiet companion or an extrovert who brings them out of their shell? Two hundred and forty-three introverts responded, and the results may surprise you:

The average “happiness score” for introverts in a relationship with another introvert—3.8 out of 5

The average happiness score for introverts in a relationship with an extrovert—3.7 out of 5

Wow! The “happiness scores” for introverts and extroverts were so close; there was only one tenth of a difference. It suggests that introverts can be happy being with either an introvert or an extrovert.

Finally, I wondered about who we *think* we’ll be happier with. To find out, I asked single introverts, “What personality would you prefer your next partner to have?” The choices were introvert, extrovert, and no preference. Two hundred and twelve introverts responded. Here’s when things got really interesting:

Introverts who would prefer to be in a relationship with another introvert—46 percent

Introverts who would prefer to be in a relationship with an extrovert—24 percent

No preference—19 percent

And 11 percent of respondents chose “other” and explained by saying they wanted a partner who is a mix of both introversion and extroversion (an ambivert), “someone who is mature,” “someone who understands me,” *etc.*

What do these numbers suggest? Introverts may *think* they’ll be happier with someone like them, temperament-wise. But, taken with the data on happiness scores, it suggests that we don’t always accurately predict what will actually make us happy. It means if you’re looking for a partner, you shouldn’t automatically rule out someone because of their temperament. If you’re in a relationship, and you’re wondering if the grass is greener on the other side (when it comes to introversion or extroversion), that may not be the case.

## **A Partner Who Understands: The Introvert-Introvert Advantage**



The numbers show that introverts can be happy with a partner of either temperament. But a relationship with a fellow introvert is going to look very different from a relationship with an extrovert. Let's take a look at the perks and challenges of being with either temperament, starting with the advantages of being with an introvert.

Amy is a thirty-something-year-old introvert engaged to another introvert, Eric. "There are just so many great things about our relationship," she tells me. For example, when they first met and were falling in love, she noticed that she didn't feel drained by spending time with Eric. "I slowly realized it was because we were both giving each other space even though we were often in the same room." When they moved in together, this easy way of interacting continued. "When we'd get home from work, we'd both just relax into our introvert time for a while. I would read, watch TV, be mellow, and Eric would put on headphones and check stuff on his computer." Giving each other space wasn't something they ever talked about; as introverts, they were automatically on the same page. After some "alone" time, they would get up and make dinner and socialize with their roommate for a short time. Eventually they would go back to giving each other their respective space. "I love that dating a fellow introvert means never having to explain when you need alone time or closing the door to the bedroom and kind of shutting the world out," Amy says.

Brandon and Rachel are two introverts who have been married for over five years. They're happy they found each other, because they match each other's energy levels and interests for the most part. "We both respect each other's time to decompress after a social gathering," Rachel says. Brandon adds, "Our activity interests often coincide. There isn't one person who's ready to read in bed and the other raring to go clubbing." They recently went on vacation to Puerto Rico. It was nice because, as Brandon says, "We both were fine with hanging out and chilling a lot rather than buzzing about and meeting people and seeing stuff."

### THE INTROVERT RELATIONSHIP FLOW STATE



There are other advantages, too. If you're dating an introvert, there's no running commentary. Meaning, your home may be a calmer space. Also, your quiet honey probably won't pressure you to socialize as much as an extrovert would. Instead, you'll have a companion for quiet fun. Think: long hikes, interesting philosophical discussions, or long nights on the couch binge-watching a favorite show. Extroverts may enjoy these types of activities too, but their appetite for them tends to be quickly satiated. After a night in, they're likely to want to get out and get social.

## Challenges of Being an Introvert-Introvert Couple

Being in a relationship with another introvert isn't all Chinese takeout and your favorite Netflix shows. There are challenges, too. For one, your alone time needs don't always line up. "I often forget that just because I'm done recharging and focusing on myself doesn't mean that Eric is," Amy tells me. "I will just walk into his office and start talking, asking questions, etc., without recognizing that he might still need alone time."

Also, introvert-introvert couples may also risk isolation. "The more difficult one is a problem I think many introvert relationships have, which is that we very rarely go anywhere or do anything," Amy says. "We both enjoy being home and alone so much that we have to remind ourselves to go out and be good friends to others, or be good partners to each other." For example, on more than one occasion, Amy and Eric bought tickets to a concert they had both wanted to see, but when the day came, they quickly talked each other into skipping it and staying home. They just didn't feel like dealing with the noise, people, and traffic. "We very rarely go to parties or game nights because we'd rather get our energy back from our long weeks by spending time alone," Amy says. "We make lots of plans to go on dates and outings that we cancel if we've had particularly rough days as introverts."

Like Amy and Eric, it may be all too easy for you to blow off friends and stay in if there's already someone at home you can snuggle up to. But be wary of losing touch with your social circle. A partner can't fulfill all your social and emotional needs—that's why we also have friends. If nothing else, if your relationship doesn't work out, you'll want to have friends you can lean on. And, especially at the beginning of a relationship, it's important to bring your significant other around your friends. They'll have an objective view of your new beloved and may spot potential problems that you miss. One way you can combat social isolation in an introvert-introvert relationship is to take turns playing the extrovert: one of you takes charge, plans a date, and motivates the other person to go.

Likewise, in introvert-introvert couples, you may have to work harder to spend time together. Introverts tend to be independent; we pursue our own individual interests and make our own fun. This can backfire if you and your partner become so independent that your lives drift in opposite directions. One of you may have to step up, and once again, play the extrovert, drawing your partner back into your world.

Brandon and Rachel have challenges, too. "We sometimes need to go out of our way to give the other alone time," Brandon says. "I will sometimes go to the

coffee shop for a weekend morning or afternoon, even if I wouldn't have otherwise done so, so that Rachel can have some alone time. Same goes for me getting my alone time, too."

Brandon can be charming and fun, but in typical introverted fashion, he's more subdued in groups. Rachel says, "It used to bother me how my older sister perceived my husband. At home, when it's just the two of us, we can be ourselves because we don't feel like we're being observed. However, at family gatherings, I can sense that my sister doesn't 'get him' because he comes across as quiet and serious. Turns out, he doesn't 'get her' either. It bums me that she can't see the way he is at home."

But perhaps the biggest problem with an introvert-introvert relationship is they have a hard time getting off the ground. Jef, an introvert who is engaged to an extrovert, says he's never dated another introvert—at least not more than one or two dates. "Maybe it's because I wouldn't know how to start a relationship with an introvert!" he tells me. "If I'm happily enjoying myself and my time, why would I approach an introvert who is happily enjoying herself and her time?"

## **Energy to Spare: The Introvert-Extrovert Advantage**

Deirdre, an introvert, dated an extrovert named Jason for about a year. "The great thing about dating him was that he was *always* up for an adventure," she tells me. "All I had to do was suggest that we go do something, and boom, we'd go do it." For example, Deirdre loves ghost stories and pop culture. The History Channel had a documentary about the best Halloween hangouts in the country, and one of them was a massive Halloween store in Worcester, Massachusetts. She had always wanted to visit it, and when she told Jason, they jumped in his car and just drove down. No convincing or cajoling needed.

And there are more advantages to being with an extrovert. For one, your extrovert will likely come with a built-in social circle. This means there will always be plenty of friends to hang out with—and some to spare. And of course, being around an extrovert means *things will happen*, because extroverts tend to be action-oriented. They have ideas, energy, and a strong need to get out and be around people. You may find that your extrovert stirs you from your cozy introvert cocoon at home and gets you to experience life in a way you may never have experienced on your own.

Jef, the introvert who is engaged to an extrovert, says the best part of his relationship is that it keeps him from living in his own little bubble—and

becoming a full-on hermit. “It’s nice to have someone at your side who’s always willing (eager, really) to start a conversation and keep it going,” he tells me. “Take work events, something that I’d normally dread. My fiancée will always be the person who gets people talking and keeps the conversation going. I learn more about other people from listening to her conversations with others than I would otherwise.”

Christy, who is in a relationship with an extrovert, told me something similar. “Extroverts complement introverts,” she says. “They not only pull us out of spending too much introvert hermit time, but when we do go out in public with them, they can do more of the talking for us if we don’t feel like it. So they can protect our energy some.”

Finally, your extrovert probably won’t be afraid to let you know what’s on their mind. Extroverts excel at articulating their thoughts (sometimes *every thought* that crosses their mind, to the chagrin of their introverted partners). The good news is, with extroverts, there aren’t guessing games. They don’t expect their partner to read their mind, and they don’t bottle up their feelings, like introverts sometimes do. If your extrovert wants something or is upset, you’ll know.

## **Challenges of Being an Introvert-Extrovert Couple**

There was a downside to dating Jason, Deirdre tells me—and you can probably guess what it was. “He loved parties,” she says. “Of course, I never wanted to stay long at all. I always couldn’t wait to get back to his place so we could snuggle and watch a movie.”

Jef says something similar. “A challenge is negotiating alone time. I’m sure that if she had full control, our calendar would consist of back-to-back social events, every night of the week. Dinner with so-and-so on Monday, happy hour with friends on Tuesday, etc., *etc.* Over the past years, she’s agreed that Sundays are off limits—they are my day to shut down and read the newspaper, make dinner, and not have anything planned. The plans are the challenge: if I’m going to be social, I prefer that it just happens—a pleasant surprise visit, not a planned ‘on this Saturday we’re going to do X with these people.’ All that planning just leads to me trying to find some excuse not to take part in the event.”

And extroverts don’t just go out to meet friends—they often bring the social event right to your living room! “They may invite random people over and not tell you because they don’t think it’s a big deal,” Christy says. “Which is kind of scary when you need alone time and have stuff to do at home—and you live

together!” This need for alone time “may look lazy and boring to them.”

Unfortunately, an extroverted partner won’t inherently understand your need for alone time. They may even take your solitude as a rejection of them. And if your solitude is hurting them, you may feel your only option is to cut back on it. But this isn’t a good idea, either, because you’ll eventually become resentful of your partner. Without enough downtime, you’ll become tired, worn out, grumpy, and foggy-headed, too. You may find yourself snapping at your partner, children, or others unexpectedly. Thankfully, to recharge your introvert energy (and your positive feelings for your partner), sometimes all it takes is an evening to yourself. Having a room of your own can help, too, especially if you feel comfortable closing the door.

Another challenge of being in a relationship with an extrovert is you may have to force yourself to speak up more. We introverts can be guilty of leaving others to read our minds and guess what we want. It’s important that you articulate your needs, especially when you’re in a relationship with an extrovert, who may not intuitively understand why you need certain things. Find a way to speak up that is clear yet loving.

## **For Extroverts: What You Should Know about Loving an Introvert**

She was the one at the party hanging back from the crowd, but she wasn’t doing nothing. From the look in her eyes, you could tell she was watching the scene and not missing a thing. When you talked to her, she didn’t bore you with superficial chatter about her weekend—she actually had something meaningful to say. Or maybe he was the quiet guy in the cubicle next to you. You almost always had to start the conversation, but when you did, it was worth it. He was witty and smart (a little unconventional), and you knew right away there was something different about him. Regardless of how you met your introvert, one thing’s for sure: his or her quiet strength drew you in, and now you’re here to stay.

Whether you and your introvert have been on one date or hundreds, here are some things you should know about being in a relationship with an introvert:

**Introverts don’t like being the center of attention.** So don’t propose live on a Jumbotron during the big game or ask the servers to sing “Happy Birthday” in a crowded restaurant. You may look around only to find your

introvert hiding under their seat!

**We won't go to every single party, happy hour, or family get-together.**

If you're an extrovert who loves a party, this is something you'll have to accept and respect about us, because it's probably not something that will change. Of course, as a partner who cares about you, we will go to some social events—but we may want to leave early because we're "peopled" out. Remember, large crowds, busy environments, and socializing drain us because we have a less active dopamine reward system than you. Look for ways to compromise.

**We may be sensitive to conflict.** In fact, many introverts struggle to meet conflict head-on, because arguing can be overstimulating and stressful. We may bottle up our feelings and revert to people-pleasing behaviors to avoid disagreements, or we may shut down when an argument does erupt. Tread gently. Some introverts find it helpful to write about their feelings or to step away from the conflict for a bit to process things. Don't take it personally if we need a brief time-out.

**A busy schedule with no downtime will poison us.** A weekend full of activities is what dopamine-loving extroverts crave, but for us, it's often too much. Our internal resources get depleted, and we feel the need to retreat alone to a quiet space to recharge. Sometimes we'll want to be completely alone, while other times, we may enjoy having you join us in quiet solidarity.

**Know that introversion and extroversion aren't all-or-nothing traits.** In other words, most people don't fit perfectly into one category or the other. Just like you can have your quiet moments, introverts can also enjoy socializing. It's really just a matter of dosage. So don't intentionally leave your introvert at home while you go to gatherings because you think they won't enjoy them. Likewise, don't be surprised if your introvert wants to host a party. Introverts get lonely too, and being the host of a party is a way we can socialize on our own terms.

**We want time with you.** This means time with *you* and *you only*—no friends, family members, or kids around for a while. We may be quiet in groups, but we can be masterful at connecting one-on-one. We'll use this time to try to reconnect with you authentically.

**Look for pastimes that feed both of our energy levels.** Your introvert may not enjoy dancing in the club after a certain time, just like you might get bored after a low-key night at home. Find a happy medium. Browse stores, go on walks, travel together, play video games, or pursue different interests while physically in the same space. Discover activities that make both of you feel good.

## When Love Doesn't Work Out

Whether you're in a relationship with an introvert or an extrovert, sometimes love doesn't work out. And this can be excruciating. "We relentlessly question everything about ourselves, and these questions can often be negative and purposeless," writes Aute Porter in an *Introvert, Dear* article. "Am I destined to be alone forever? Am I too shy? Was I boring? Am I too awkward?" If we're the one who got rejected (the dumpee, not the dumper), "self-esteem plummets to the deepest lengths. Usually we try to justify the situation as a way to get over the person once and for all, which never works. Inevitably, our negative questions reach a new low. *Oh man ... what is wrong with me?*"

Introverts and extroverts often react to situations differently, and breakups are no exception. While extroverts may distract themselves from heartache by going out and being with friends, we may find ourselves withdrawing from others and spending more time alone in an effort to make sense of what happened. Also, we may take longer than extroverts to get back into a relationship; research published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* found that divorced extroverts were more likely than introverts to quickly remarry.

Did you just go through a breakup or divorce? Things may feel awful right now, and maybe you can't imagine life ever getting better. But take heart. Eventually, things *will* get better with time. It sounds clichéd, but it's true—time really is the ultimate healer. According to a study published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 71 percent of young adults took about eleven weeks to see the positive aspects of their breakup. In other words, people started to get over the breakup in a little under three months. Of course, it's a little different when it comes to the end of a marriage. A poll conducted by a dating website for people over the age of fifty found that it took an average of eighteen months for a divorcee to feel "over" the split. Other studies indicate that it takes about a year to get through the really painful, negative stage that follows a divorce, and another three to five years to fully recover. Keep in mind that there are a lot of



factors that influence the healing process, so your time frame may be similar or different—and that’s okay.

The important thing is to start moving toward your healing—in a way that honors your introversion. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- It’s okay to cry. Your feelings are natural and completely normal. If need be, cry until you run out of Kleenex. Crying can actually make you feel better—after a while. One study from the University of Tilburg in the Netherlands found that although participants didn’t feel immediate relief, about 90 minutes *after* crying, they reported feeling better than before they had cried. It’s not clear yet why the body works this way, but it could be because tears release endorphins, which are our body’s natural painkiller. Also, tears that are the result of intense emotion release hormones that allow your body to clear stored toxins.
- When you feel ready, talk to someone in your inner circle about what happened. We introverts tend to keep our feelings and experiences to ourselves, but now is not the time to bottle up your pain. Researcher Matthew Lieberman and his colleagues found that even though it may not seem like we discover any new brilliant insights when talking to someone, simply naming your feelings with words like “angry” or “sad” can help. That’s because talking about negative feelings activates the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, which is a part of the brain that governs impulse control. According to Lieberman, this seems to dampen down the response in the amygdala, which is the area of the brain responsible for fear, panic, and other strong emotions. The conversation doesn’t even have to be deep and substantive (although that’s a bonus); simply voicing your feelings and labeling them has this positive effect.
- Wallow, but only for so long. Set a time limit. Conventional wisdom says the mourning period should be half the length of the relationship, so if you dated someone for six months, you should take three months to heal. This time frame may not work for you, though, so choose one that’s right. The important thing is committing to making positive changes in your life after the grieving period—even if you don’t feel like it.
- Resist the temptation to check in on your ex virtually. Pulling up your ex’s Facebook profile may seem innocent; you tell yourself you just want to see how they’re doing. But it will probably do more damage than you think, especially if you see they’ve already changed their status from “in a relationship” to “single” faster than it took for you to get another box of

Kleenex. Consider blocking or unfollowing your ex on all forms of social media so their updates don't show up in your feed. Even months later, when you've mostly gotten over it, coming across a picture of your ex looking cute and recoupled may be enough to ruin your day—or days (this has happened to me). The innocent update will likely launch you right back into tears, grief, and self-loathing.

- Some alone time will be good for you—it will help you process your thoughts and feelings, so take this time. But resist the urge to hole up at home for days or weeks on end. This doesn't mean you have to hit the bars and clubs (like your extroverted friends may be urging you to do). Instead, try getting outside. Walk your dog, hike, or bike. Take photos of the changing fall leaves or glittering snow. Find a park bench in the sun and read a book. Being in nature can help reduce stress, and sunlight and exercise are instant mood boosters.

## **Being Single Can Be Awesome, Too**

What happens when you don't want to be in a relationship? For many introverts, being single is a deliberate choice. Some can't imagine sharing a home with someone else. Others don't want a relationship to encroach on their work, hobbies, or alone time. Still others have met their soul mate, married, and even raised children with them, until they passed away—and they're not looking to replace what they once had.

Choosing the single life can actually be pretty awesome—and a lot of people do, according to Eric Klinenberg, author of *Going Solo*. Nearly 50 percent of adults in the US are single, and 32.7 million—roughly one out of every seven adults—live alone. Although there are no statistics on this, I'd be willing to bet that a lot of single adults are introverts. That's because there are pretty great benefits of being a single introvert. “There is a lot more independence when you're single as you rely more on yourself than you would if you were in a relationship,” Dean, an introvert, tells me. “There is also less chance of drama and conflict.” For Lance, it's about freedom. “You can do what you want when you want,” he says. Renato says the best part of being single is “not having someone expecting your attention when you just want to be alone.” For Lora: “My house is a quiet drama-free zone. I guess it boils down to being able to be me and not having to apologize to anyone for loving my life as it is.” Finally, Kashya says what's great about it is “not having to put in the effort to be ‘on’ all the time.”

Research shows that the benefits of being single are real. According to Klinenberg, singles have been found to volunteer more, have more friends, go out more in their neighborhoods, and even have the potential to go much further in their careers than people who are married. So whether you're choosing to go solo as a permanent lifestyle or as a temporary measure, take heart. Being single can bring good things your way.

If you're single, you likely have plenty of time and energy to focus on yourself. If you haven't already, reach out to interesting people in your life and cultivate more friendships. Having strong, close platonic relationships will remind you that you're never truly alone. Also, spend your free time doing things that you enjoy. "Whatever it is you love doing, go do it," writes Amelia Brown in an *Introvert, Dear* article about being single. "Being in a relationship can sometimes prevent us from spending our free time the way we want because we make compromises for the person we love. Being single gives you the freedom to do whatever you want. Take advantage of your free time. When you do get into a relationship again, you'll be glad you went on that road trip or took that cooking class. You'll have more confidence in your own abilities and have new, exciting experiences to talk about."

## **In Closing**

Introverts can make incredible partners. When we do fall in love, it's intense, because finding true connection doesn't happen often for us. But as much as we love our partners, we probably won't show our feelings in the typical extroverted way. We probably won't gush, cry tears of happiness, or tell everyone we know about our new SO. You'll see our love in other ways: an understanding glance, a thoughtful love note, or a compliment whispered in your ear before you fall asleep. Or something less romantic, but extremely useful. Something that will make our partner's life a little bit easier. For example, one morning, my introverted boyfriend proudly announced that he had mapped out a route that would shave three minutes off my commute to work. When I responded with nonchalance, he gently reminded me, "This is how I show my love."

## Chapter 10

# DO I REALLY HAVE TO DO THIS AGAIN TOMORROW? INTROVERTS AND CAREER

Kayla Mueller, an introvert, was sitting at her desk at work, bent over papers spread across her desk. She was concentrating deeply, like introverts tend to do. “When I focus on something, it’s like my entire brain dives deep into whatever ocean I’m exploring,” she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. “I can’t multitask because to do that is to keep the brain only shallowly invested so that it can easily switch from one pool to another. My brain does not do this. It is all or nothing.”

As she sits there, her extremely extroverted coworker walks into her office and fires a question at her. “I drag my eyes up like molasses sliding from a can, and she stands there, staring at me and waiting for my answer,” Kayla writes. “My brain is still swimming back from the ocean, so I am not even sure what she asked yet. As my brain finally reaches the surface and takes a deep breath, her question hits me. It is simple, and I know the answer, but I’m not there yet. My brain is still in the water, eagerly searching for the dry land of another topic.”

Kayla’s coworker stands there, impatient. So Kayla tries to give her something: “Yes, er, no—wait, yes.” Her coworker raises an eyebrow and snorts a small laugh.

Eventually Kayla is able to rattle off the full answer, and her coworker leaves, giggling to herself. “Because of her talkative, gossipy nature, she will probably tell everyone about what just happened,” Kayla laments. “How she asked such a simple question, and yet I stared at her, dumbfounded.”

Kayla has no disability or mental impairment. In fact, she received a scholarship to attend college and graduated with honors. The only thing that’s

“wrong” with her, she writes, is that she’s an introvert. An introvert who needs time to think and reflect before answering.

“Why, then, do I constantly get these muffled giggles, pointed questions, and judging looks?” Kayla wonders in her writing. “My coworkers and others around me see something different. They do not see the thoughts running through my brain, the padlocks being opened to pull out old memories, or the little lightning bolts that send new information to my sensors while I wait to see what it all means. The only thing they see is me sitting there with a blank expression on my face.” So, nearly every time, they jump to the wrong conclusions about Kayla. “They assume I don’t understand what they’re talking about or that I’m a little slow.”

Have you ever felt like your introvert skills are undervalued at work? If so, read on. In this chapter, we’ll explore the strengths of introverts on the job, as well as how you can choose a job that plays to those strengths.

## **Why More Companies Should Hire Introverts**

Introverts can make seriously awesome employees and leaders, whether it’s in the office, factory, store, boardroom, or classroom. For one, our penchant for working alone empowers us to solve problems and come up with unique ideas. We’re the ones quietly sitting at our desks, turning ideas over and over in our mind, rather than clamoring to make our voice heard in a noisy conference room. And there’s a benefit to this. When you’re alone, you can clear your mind and focus your thoughts, and all this deep, concentrated thinking can lead to novel solutions and brilliant ideas. So, forget the brainstorming session—they may be overrated, anyway. According to Keith Sawyer, a psychologist at Washington University in St. Louis, research has consistently shown that brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same number of people who work by themselves and later combine their ideas, he tells the *Washington Post*.

Speaking of problem solving, we introverts are persistent. We tend to stick with problems longer—well past when everyone else has moved on to another topic or gone home for the day. Albert Einstein, the brilliant physicist who developed the theory of relativity, was probably an introvert. He’s widely quoted as saying that while he didn’t think of himself as a genius, the secret to his success was that he simply stayed with problems longer than other people did.

And don’t think that introverts can’t work on a team. In fact, research shows that quiet, neurotic introverts make *better* team players than extroverts in the long run. Corinne Bendersky and Neha Parikh Shah found that while extroverts

make great first impressions, they may disappoint us when they're a part of a team. Bendersky and Shah conducted two studies, one that surveyed employee behavior toward extroverts and neurotic introverts, and another that noted MBA students' behavior. They found that the perceived value of extroverts' work and their reputation among their colleagues actually diminished over time. In other words, bosses often have high expectations for extroverts because they are enthusiastic, outgoing, and assertive; however, extroverts may not live up to these expectations. Plus, Bendersky told *USA Today*, the extroverts they studied were often poor listeners, and despite their drive to be social, they didn't collaborate well in practice.

Introverts, on the other hand, particularly those who score high in "neuroticism" on the Big Five scale, may be the better employee in the long run. Although neuroticism is often associated with anxiety, negative emotions, and irritability, people who are neurotic also tend to care a lot about what others think of them. This means they may work harder on a team because they worry about how their colleagues perceive them, and they don't want to be seen as not pulling their weight. So, while companies may be attracted to hiring extroverts because they interview well, bosses should remember to check their expectations—a gregarious personality doesn't necessarily equal better results.

Also, in the work place, introverts are often the calm in the center of the storm. When everyone is losing their head over the company's latest policy change—huddling in outraged groups in the break room or spouting off their impassioned opinions in meetings—introverts are already thinking of new ways to adjust. Quietly.

Finally, introverts really know their stuff. An introverted writer friend of mine is basically a walking encyclopedia of Celtic mythology. For example, if you ask him about the hero Cú Chulainn, he can not only tell you how he died but also what kind of chariot he drove around in. Listening to him talk, I've found myself thinking, "Wow, he really knows his stuff!" That's because introverts love learning and adding to their vast stores of specialty knowledge. It's no surprise that introverts often become experts in their field.

## **Introverts and Job Happiness, by the Numbers**

As I researched careers for introverts, I started to wonder: What makes introverts happy on the job? What makes them unhappy? Are there certain jobs that introverts default to? To find out, I once again surveyed people who self-identified as introverts (readers of *Introvert, Dear*). Four hundred and six people

responded. First, I asked them to rank how happy they were with their job on a scale of 1 to 5. Then I asked, “What is your job?” Jobs ranged from everything—from a teacher to an aerospace engineer to a vegan baker. One person wrote that they worked at a worm and cricket farm; their job was to raise giant mealworms. (Shout-out to you, Worm Master!)

You might imagine that the introverts who were happy with their jobs would report that they are librarians, writers, or truck drivers who spend a lot of time alone (typical “introverted” positions). But that wasn’t the case. There was no clear trend about which jobs made introverts happy. Surprisingly, many introverts who were happy with their jobs had positions that were people-centric, such as being a psychotherapist, nurse, teacher, home health-care worker, manager, *etc.* In fact, roughly half had jobs that were typical “introvert” jobs, like accountant, bookkeeper, or writer; the other half had jobs that involved a lot of direct interaction with other people. These are introverts who reported that their job was “pretty great” or “amazing—it couldn’t be better” (a 4 or 5 on the happiness scale).

I also asked introverts *why* they liked or disliked their job. Though I received a wide variety of answers, certain trends emerged. People who were happy with their job often said they liked it for the following reasons:

- I enjoy getting to help people and having the chance to make a difference in people’s lives.
- There is just the right amount of people interaction—not too much or too little.
- I am often left alone, which allows me to concentrate for long periods of time.
- My boss respects me and does not micromanage me.
- My job gives me autonomy and flexibility.
- I get to be creative.
- I frequently get to learn new things.
- I love the people I work with.
- My company values its employees.
- I deal with clients mostly through email—not many face-to-face interactions.
- I have the option to work from home.

What about the introverts who were unhappy with their jobs? Again, there was no clear overall trend as far as what type of career they had. In fact, some of the same jobs that made the “happy” list also made the “unhappy” list, such as

teacher, writer, manager, IT consultant, librarian, *etc.* That's right—there is an introvert out there somewhere who is surrounded by books and who is not happy! This person said they dislike their job because they have to share an office with someone, they don't get to be creative, and they don't have much control over their time. Did that just kill one of your introvert job fantasies?

However, there were some jobs that were clear losers. These jobs only appeared on the “unhappy” list, and respondents said these positions made them “miserable” or “not very happy” (a 1 or a 2 on the happiness scale). They were:

- Retail employee
- Call center agent
- Customer service representative

I suspect these jobs make introverts miserable because they have to interact with people frequently, and not in a meaningful way. “I have to act happy all the time,” an introvert who works in retail writes. “I have to talk on the phone and be nice even when the other person is being abusive,” a call center agent writes. “I have to deal with people who don't care about you, or others, for that matter,” another retail worker laments.

Other reasons introverts disliked their jobs, whether they worked in retail, customer service, or something else, included:

- My job is boring and repetitive.
- It doesn't pay well.
- I am stressed and overworked.
- I don't get enough freedom and autonomy.
- There is a lot of turnover in the office.
- There is a poisonous work culture and too much office drama.
- My boss micromanages me.
- It's not my passion.
- I don't get enough time off.
- I have to make too many phone calls.
- I constantly have to meet new people and push myself out of my comfort zone.

My research isn't meant to be a comprehensive career guide, but I think it provides some important takeaways for introverts. The first is that introverts



don't necessarily have to seek a solitary job. Some of the happiest introverts had jobs that put them in direct contact with people every day. Just make sure your job allows you to interact with people in a *meaningful* way. Troubleshooting angry customers' billing questions in a call center or telling people about the latest sale in a fake happy voice probably won't count as meaningful. It seemed like introverts who reported being happy with their jobs had stumbled into a type of Goldilocks scenario. You know, this porridge is too hot, this one is too cold, but, oh, this one is just right! These introverts spend part of their work day interacting with people and part of the day alone. They can close their office door when they need some quiet or occasionally work from home. In other words, they have balance. They don't have to be "on" all the time (only some of the time). They can retreat before an introvert hangover threatens.

Also, when considering a position, think about more than how much it pays and what your main duties are. Do you think you'll like and get along with your coworkers? Does your boss seem like the control-freak type who will micromanage you? To get a sense of the company culture and what your coworkers are like, try to meet some of them during the interview process. Have a short conversation with them. What kind of feeling do you get from talking to them? Do you seem to "click" with them? Will your introverted work style jive with theirs? Also, ask questions during the interview about how much you'll be expected to work in groups and collaborate. You may even go so far as to ask about the "personality" of the organization. Do people make a lot of chitchat during the work day and socialize outside of work frequently? Or do people mostly keep to themselves?

Perhaps most important, during the interview, make sure to ask how often you'll be expected to talk on the phone. Talking on the phone frequently was hands down the biggest complaint from introverts who disliked their job. If the job requires you to constantly make phone calls to people you don't know well, it's probably not for you.

## **When a Job Constantly Exhausts You**

Colleen Sweeney is an introvert who ended up in a job that wasn't right for her—she worked for a major housewares retailer during the busy holiday season. "I knew from the moment I completed the first interview that this job was not going to be an enjoyable experience, based on the personality of the interviewing manager," she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. "She was what I would call a stereotypical extrovert: extremely outgoing, never took no for an answer, and

just really did not understand introverts. As I got to know the other managers over the following weeks, I came to realize that my personality and theirs would not mesh.”

Working in retail meant she was required to push the store’s credit card on every customer, and “to not stop until they basically became belligerent toward us.” As an introvert, she had a hard time doing this. She hated having to push people to do things that she herself would not like having pushed on her. And it was hard to deal with the constant rejection from customers. But she would do it again and again, all day long, because she and the other employees were being watched by their boss on camera. She would usually take a single “no” for an answer and move on. Her boss eventually noticed that her credit card sales record was almost nonexistent, and that led to another uncomfortable conversation for Colleen.

The most anxiety-filled moment came when she had to walk around the store trying to sell gift cards to customers. “I had to carry five on my person, along with some mints, and ask customers who appeared to be stuck on gift ideas if they wanted to purchase gift cards,” she writes. “We also had to do this when ringing up customers, but it was much easier doing it there than randomly walking up to strangers. I knew that several managers were on the floor, and no doubt monitoring my every move. I did approach a few people, but was unsuccessful. At some point, my manager walked up to me and asked me how my sales were going. I did not lie; I told her the truth. At this point, she scolded me like a small child and insinuated that my job was on the line.”

Colleen broke down in tears in the break room that day. It wasn’t because she was afraid of losing her job—she had already decided she was not going to accept their offer if they asked her to stay on after the holidays. It was because she was so *uncomfortable* in her job, she writes. She ended up leaving the job one week before her trial period was up. “I honestly cannot say I regret leaving, because my mental health immediately improved upon giving my notice,” she writes.

Today, she’s moved on to a different job. But she still wishes some things in the retail industry would change. “The retail industry does not really care if a person is introverted,” she writes. “They just want a person to make sales, and they do not really care if it makes a person uncomfortable.” She understands that making sales is an important part of retail, but there are some things the industry could do to make this easier for everyone. For one, stores could create volunteer lists for employees to take on the “undesirable” jobs, like walking the sales floor selling gift cards to customers. Also, they could take an employee’s personality into question when assigning them tasks. “The managers I had before the

housewares store knew I was not comfortable working in the fitting room, so they took me off the roster for that zone,” she writes. “I am not saying to give employees preferential treatment, but to realize they are not working to their full potential if they are not comfortable.”

“I would love for introverts to be seen as completely ‘normal’ people, and not be considered weird because they are quieter and sometimes do not want to socialize,” she adds. “I was ostracized because really rude customers deeply affected me, and because I was quiet.”

## **Choosing the Right Field**

So how do you choose a college major or career path that’s right for you? To answer that question, I turned to Nancy Ancowitz, presentation and career coach, and author of *Self-Promotion for Introverts*. First, Ancowitz tells me in an interview, do some self-reflection and think about what helps you thrive. “Chances are, as an introvert, you prefer plenty of quiet time for activities like research, thinking, writing, and analyzing data, as opposed to back-to-back large group meetings,” she says.

Then, think about what type of role you’d like to play in an organization. Would you prefer being an individual contributor, a team member, or a people manager—or any combination of these positions? For example, an individual contributor might be a freelance writer, a team member might take the form of being a social media strategist, and a people manager might be a project manager or the manager of a retail store. “Through self-reflection, paying attention to which activities give you energy and which drain you, you will discover what brings out the best in you,” Ancowitz says. And if you’re a student who has limited job experience, reflect on your experiences in school or volunteer work as starting points.

Most important, consider which rewards fuel you. Do you like getting accolades from managers and clients? Money? Intellectual satisfaction? Do you like learning new skills, helping others, or making a contribution to a cause? Even if your position or work environment aren’t ideal, if you have the right motivation, you may find yourself gaining the emotional energy you need to keep going.

Finally, go on plenty of informational interviews to learn from pros in the fields you’re interested in. If possible, job shadow. This way you can find out what a day in their work life is like before you commit. You may be surprised to discover how much a librarian has to interact with others or how much a

journalist has to talk on the phone.

### **Ten Best Jobs for Introverts, Ranked by Salary**

Tony Lee, publisher of [CareerCast.com](https://www.careercast.com), has been writing about careers since the 1980s. Every year, he puts together lists of the best and worst jobs. Collaborating with two academics, in 2014, he compiled a list of ten jobs for introverts and shy people (Lee lumped shy individuals in with introverts because he figured they both wanted jobs that allowed them to avoid an overload of interactions with people each day). Lee and his colleagues thought about jobs that would play to introverts' strengths, as well as allow them to work quietly and independently at times.

Here is Lee's list, ranked in order of salary. All salary information comes from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, according to Lee. "Projected growth" is how much this job field is expected to grow by the year 2020.

1. Astronomer—salary: \$96,460/projected growth: 10 percent
2. Geoscientist—salary: \$90,890/projected growth: 16 percent
3. Social Media Manager—salary: \$54,170/projected growth: 12 percent
4. Film/video editor—salary: \$51,300/projected growth: 3 percent
5. Court Reporter—salary: \$48,160/projected growth: 10 percent
6. Archivist—salary: \$47,340/projected growth: 11 percent
7. Industrial Machine Repairer—salary: \$46,920/projected growth: 17 percent
8. Financial Clerk—salary: \$36,850/projected growth: 11 percent
9. Medical Records Technician—salary: \$34,160/projected growth: 22 percent
10. Animal Care and Service Workers—salary: \$19,970 (caretakers); \$25,270 (trainers)/projected growth: 15 percent

### **Work at Home in Your Pajamas (Really)**

Making a living doesn't necessarily mean you have to hold down a nine-to-five job. Many introverts go the self-employed route, and this makes sense: we tend to be self-starters, we are independent, and we have big ideas. Furthermore, when you control how you work, you'll probably feel less drained at the end of the day. You're left with some energy and maybe even eagerness to socialize with your friends and loved ones. Here are some self-employment ideas for introverts:

- Graphic designer or web designer

- Coder
- Social media consultant
- Writer, author, copy writer, technical writer, or blogger
- Resume writer
- Photographer
- Private music lessons instructor
- Business or life coach
- Online tutor

## **The Introvert's Need for Meaningful Work**

Are you like me? You know that career advice is helpful, but reading about salaries, projected job growth, etc., can leave you feeling like something is missing. That's because many introverts don't just want a paycheck—they want a calling, too. They crave work that allows them to express their authentic selves—a career that embodies their interests, values, skills, and personality. In other words, they want to “do what they are.” Really, in all areas of life, introverts don't feel “whole” unless their outer life reflects their inner life. If people can't see them for who they really are—the secret world inside them—they are inclined to feel fragmented and discontent.

It also comes down to a matter of time and energy. You likely spend a lot of time at your job: if you work full-time, you spend about 50 percent of your total waking hours on a work day “on the clock.” You probably spend more time at your job on a work day than you do with your loved ones, alone, or doing meaningful hobbies (e.g., working on your novel). If you're going to clock this many hours doing something—and put in this much energy—you want it to matter. Introverts tend to have a small circle of close friends, because when we invest our time and limited energy into something, we want it to be exceptionally good; it's the same with our nine-to-five efforts.

As an introvert, finding a meaningful career is likely intertwined with finding yourself. You may feel like you can't build a career that reflects your identity until you figure out what that identity is. The downside is it can take a long time to discover who you really are—years or decades. And you may feel like you can't take action until you have complete information (introverts like to look before they leap). In the meantime, you may feel forced to settle for a day job to pay the bills. You hope to one day uncover your true self and, with it, your true

calling. Unfortunately, settling for a day job is rarely satisfying. It may seem like your true talents and skills are being wasted on menial tasks. You feel meant for so much more.

Likewise, introverts approach their careers differently than extroverts. When searching for direction for their lives, extroverts tend to look outside themselves. They may ask themselves, *What careers are “hot” right now? How do my talents and skills fit with the existing landscape? What types of positions will earn me a good salary?* Introverts, on the other hand, tend to turn inward for direction. We do what feels authentic to us; we’re guided by our own inner compass, not the winds of the world. This means we may not consider what will bring us more money, a higher status, another car, and a bigger house. Remember, introverts are less motivated by rewards than extroverts—this applies to our careers, too.

Often, introverts want their work to speak for itself. This is especially true when we’re creating something, such as writing a book, building a business, or making art. We may feel uncomfortable monetizing our creations; we make art or publish the blog post because we care deeply about the expression itself. Likewise, we may shrink from marketing our products or services, because we loathe being the center of attention. We also want our work to speak for itself in the office or classroom. We rarely toot our own horn and shout, “Look at me!” We simply want to solve our client’s problem thoroughly (and quietly). We want to earn an A on the paper, even if no one except the teacher sees the quality of our work.

## **When You Find Your Calling**

As an introvert, it may not be easy to find your calling—but it can be done. Ann is an introvert who is a special education teacher. She’s been teaching in some capacity for close to forty years. And she believes she’s found her calling. “I love my students!” she tells me. “I love the challenge of finding how to support them in their learning.” As an introvert, one strength she brings to the job is the ability to dive deep. “I will go online, or to the library, or to a bookstore to find what I need,” she says. Being a special education teacher is different than being a classroom teacher, because she doesn’t have to manage as many students. “I get to target individuals or small groups, which is where I feel I am most effective.”

The days can get long. She can handle being “on” during the school day, but when she has to stay back after school for meetings, that’s when she feels it and

needs quiet. “When I get home there is *no* extra noise—not radio, not TV, not the computer,” she says. “Some days it can get exhausting, so I need to allow time on the weekend to recover, too. If I need to stop for groceries or another errand on the way home, I avoid large stores—too much sensory overload!”

Even though the job can be tiring, Ann says there’s nothing she’d rather do. “It is a stimulating job,” she says. “I’ve been working in special education since 2001 and have not looked back.”

Her advice to fellow introverts looking for their calling? Don’t be afraid to change jobs if your current one isn’t meeting your needs. Also, use personality assessments and/or career inventories to help you identify your strengths. “Sometimes you can access a community college to take a preference inventory,” she says. “I did one in high school, and again after I had been in education for a few years. I went back to school at a time when my peers were starting to think about how many years they had until an early retirement. I earned two special education licenses then. Three years after that I tried graduate school, and a few years after that, I added two more licenses. Right now, I’m licensed in five areas. You can be shy or quiet, but you can still work towards your calling.”

Tina is the founder of a community for music-lovers called The Daily Listening. She identifies her job as her calling because it is pretty much what she saw herself doing when she was a kid. “While I had no idea about the role technology would play back then, I knew that I loved music and that I wanted to be closer to it,” she tells me. “The fact that I’ve built my career from the ground up really inspires me whenever I look back. I still have a long way to go, but just the notion of working towards a goal that I created on my own is my favorite part.”

There are a lot of things she loves about her job. Probably the best thing is that she gets to work from home. “I don’t have to worry about taking NYC’s very crowded public transportation in the morning,” she says. She also loves that she gets to combine her love for music with writing. Plus, there’s that whole “making your own rules and controlling your own schedule” thing. As an introvert, flexibility is important to her.

Her advice to fellow introverts looking for their calling is straightforward: “Think about what makes you come alive, and go follow it.”

## **Six Questions to Ask Yourself to Help You Find Your Calling**

Still trying to figure out what your life’s calling might be? Here are six questions

you can ask yourself that can help point you in the right direction:

- 1. What message do you want to share with the world?** Each of us has been shaped by a lifetime of experiences—and each of us has a unique message to share with the world. After learning about my introversion, my message became, “It’s okay to be an introvert.” If you could rent a billboard in Times Square for just one day, what would you put on it? In other words, what is the one thing you wish the world knew and understood?
- 2. How do you want to be remembered when you’re gone?** No one likes to think about what will happen after they die, but looking at the bigger picture can help you put things in perspective. Let’s say you lived a full, rich life, and you are now ready to leave something behind for the ones you love—and for society. What would that legacy be? What qualities, ideas, or philosophies would you want others to have when you’re gone? In what small (or big) way would you make the world a better place for others for years (or decades) to come?
- 3. What did you want to be when you grew up?** What captured your imagination as a child? What careers fascinated you? How did you picture yourself when you daydreamed about your life as an adult? Many of our aspirations were born in childhood.
- 4. What kinds of tasks don’t feel like work to you?** Think about your current job (or your experiences as a student, if you’re still in school). There are probably some tasks you do each day that feel like utter drudgery, but there are probably other tasks that don’t feel like work at all. These tasks are a cakewalk to complete, and you get compliments from others about them. Build your calling around these energizing tasks.
- 5. What kind of work would you never do again, no matter how much you were paid?** Figuring out what is definitely *not* your calling can help you narrow your options. What kind of work can you just not stand?
- 6. Who is doing your dream job, and what can you learn from them?** Think about the people in your life. Who has a career that you envy? Don’t limit yourself to just the people you know—is there a “famous” person you have read or heard about who is doing a job you wish you had? Learn from them and the path they took. Do you need a license or a degree to do that job? More skills, or certain contacts in the field? Figure out how they got to where they are today.



## **In Closing**

I've had a lot of jobs in my life. My first job was keeping the showroom clean in a furniture store. I had to dust, vacuum, and, worst of all, clean the toilets. Since then, I've worked as a tutor, journalist, editor, marketing assistant, teacher, and now author/publisher. During some of my worst jobs, I went to bed thinking, "Do I have to get up and do this all over again tomorrow?" When you have a job that makes you miserable, it becomes a slow-acting poison. It hurts not only in the moment but also well after the fact—because we introverts tend to think and ruminate so much. Jobs that sucked my energy left me with little desire to socialize or do my cherished introvert hobbies like reading and writing. I was just too drained.

The best job advice I can give you is this: go where you're celebrated, not just tolerated. Does your job make use of your introvert talents? Do you get to do things that play to what you truly excel at? Do your coworkers and supervisors see value in you? Most important, do you feel proud of your work? There is no perfect job out there, and you'll always have to make trade-offs, whatever you do. But if your job leaves you continually exhausted, perhaps it's time to make a change. It's never too late to make positive changes in your life. You might just find that a different job makes other parts of your life better, too.

## Chapter 12

# INSIDE THE INTROVERT'S INNER WORLD

When I was a little girl, I was the star of a movie. The camera zoomed in for a close-up on my tears as I argued with my mom. It pulled back as I stared out my bedroom window at the stars, my mind filled with questions and snatches of thoughts. An ever-present narrator foreshadowed what was to come. As I walked into my classroom, the god-like voice said, “Suddenly, everything was different today.” When I was riding my bike through my neighborhood at night, it warned, “She didn’t know what was waiting for her in the shadows.” My movie was full of beautiful, intimate moments, as well as drama, humor, and, frequently, suspense. In every scene, the actors’ performances seemed authentic and raw.

But it was a movie no one would ever see. It all happened in my head. I was the director, producer, narrator, and star actor. There were no camera crews, makeup artists, or script writers. It was only me, and my vivid inner world.

Throughout my childhood, I often found myself drifting away to another world. (Sometimes I still do today.) This was a world where anything could happen. A young girl could get superpowers that allowed her to command animals. There was danger—or magic—always lurking just out of view. It was a world of probing questions and relentless curiosity. It wondered how my life was connected to other humans’ lives forward and backward in time. My placid outward appearance belied how much was going on inside me. It was a secret only I knew. I had strong emotions and an inner monologue that rarely stopped, but I usually couldn’t find the words to express the sum of what was on my mind.

What is it like in your inner world? In this chapter, we’ll explore the introvert’s mind. We’ll tackle creativity, Resting Sad Face, overthinking, and

more.

## **What the Introvert's Inner World Is Like**

I asked introverts to describe their inner world. Here's what they told me:

**It's an adventurous escape from reality.** "My inner world changes, to be honest," Andrea tells me. "I'm always the centerpiece, but it's my escape from reality. I've gone on countless adventures. It's kind of like reading a book."

**It's a place of comfort.** "My inner world is a world of peace and harmony," Ghada says. "It is not wild and imaginative but homey and calm. It is a replica of my actual world yet with no clashes ... a comfort zone."

**It's a salvage yard.** "I think my inner world is a little bit like a salvage yard," indie rocker jeremy messersmith tells me. "Any idea tossed my way gets examined and taken apart to see how it works. Sometimes ideas are rebuilt, sometimes they're scrapped or turned into pieces of art. It can be unrelenting sometimes, and it can be hard to switch off."

**It's a continual search for truth and understanding.** "My inner world is me searching through every dark alley and warned-about taboo. I'm looking for every hidden answer to the mystery of this so-called life, and in the end, all I've really learned is more about myself and less about everything I thought I knew," James says.

**It's constantly analyzing the people around you.** Ashley says, "I think about people and what makes them tick. I love investigating humanity. Some of my favorite things to think about are how alike we all are, despite our social status, where we may live, or what culture we identify with."

**It's a movie with multiple alternative endings.** "I'm playing out numerous scenarios that happened slightly differently, never happened, or could happen but likely won't. I often have to calm myself down from some intense emotion I sparked through whatever my imagination conjured. And often, I have very little control over outcomes unless I go all *Kill Bill* with it," Nicole says.

**It pulls you in opposite directions.** "For me, it's like there are two people arguing on issues all the time," Bishrul says.

**It drives your creativity.** “My imaginative nature gets transferred into creative action,” Kelly says. “A desire to remodel my kitchen turned into hours of drafting and building new cabinet banks, Shaker doors, and intricate pullouts for garbage, recycling, pots and pans, *etc.* A desire to fill an empty wall space with artwork resulted in fixating on a gorgeous Thailand mountain line and turned into hours of learning the Bob Ross landscape painting technique to make my own masterpiece.”

**It houses emotions no one else sees.** “My emotions play out on the canvas of my inner world,” Brandon says. “I naturally tend not to express them too wildly in an outward sense, but they are rich and vivid on the inside. I’ve spent decades learning their nuances, to the point where I can often notice the second an emotion begins to bud and watch it unfold throughout my body.”

**It’s an ever-changing landscape.** “My mind is constantly writing stories and asking ‘What if?’ questions,” Marissa says. “Whether it’s plotting out the next scene in my fiction book, inserting myself into the Star Wars universe, or mulling over what I should have done differently in a real-world situation, I’m looking for patterns and plotlines that fit together. And sometimes it feels like a trap as my mind spins down into hopeless scenarios and imagined worlds where my worst fears come true.”

**It’s made of hunches and feelings that transcend words.** “Some people describe their minds as organized boxes, but mine is more of a rushing body of water with emotions, memories, thoughts, and inspirations all blending together,” Mike says. “Sometimes it can be easy to describe in words, like if I’m focused on a memory or thinking about what someone said. However, other times, it is much more abstract. I’ll be filled with an emotion I can’t quite describe, but it’s present and powerful nonetheless. I often feel like I’m close to discovering something just out of reach, or else I have discovered it.”

**It’s full of imaginary characters and scenarios.** Jill, a writer, says, “It includes all of my imaginary friends (a.k.a. the characters) that end up in my books. They’re so vivid and real that sometimes I react to what they ‘say’ and ‘do’ with a facial expression. I also imagine wild scenarios like meeting celebrity hunks, being on reality TV shows, and winning an Oscar.”

**It’s the fountain of your confidence.** Lauren says, “In my inner world, I am the gladiator.”

**It's truly another world.** “My inner world is endlessly expansive. I usually retreat to the vision I have for myself someday, a cozy cottage surrounded by trees and woodland creatures. But I also sometimes escape into worlds that are not realistic. They are magical and beautiful. Other times I retreat into places I've been to before where I was really happy,” Amelia says.

**It can't be easily described.** Jessica says, “My inner world is kind of complicated. I'm not good at expressing what it's like.” Laura says, “I wish a typewriter could just spill out all of my inner thoughts!”

## **Introverts and Creativity, by the Numbers**

Introverts spend a lot of time reflecting, analyzing, and daydreaming. Does this make introverts creative? To find out, I once again surveyed people who self-identify as introverts. A whopping 809 introverts responded—more than for any other survey! (Does this mean introverts are drawn to the topic of creativity?) First, I simply asked, “Do you consider yourself to be a creative person?” The results:

Yes—81 percent

No—19 percent

Wow! About four out of five introverts described themselves as creative. Maybe all that time in our head really does pay off.

Next, I asked about the types of creative activities introverts like to do. I gave them several options and said they could pick more than one. They could also add their own. They responded:

61 percent write or journal

42 percent paint, draw, do graphic design, or sculpt

16 percent create music

61 percent like thinking of new ideas

29 percent opted for something else—everything from knitting, photography, and filmmaking to woodworking, acting, and writing software. If you can name it, introverts are doing it.

Next I asked, “Do you think your introversion helps make you a more creative person?” The results:

Yes—74 percent  
No—4 percent  
I don't know—23 percent

I found it fascinating how the majority of introverts agree that their quiet, reflective nature boosts their creativity.

Finally, of the people who answered “yes” to the previous question, I asked *why* they thought their introversion helped make them more creative. I received 391 responses. Here is a sampling of what they wrote:

“I have more time to reflect than someone who’s going out all the time.”

“The creative process requires a lot of alone time to think, to feel, to process everything, then to bring it all out into the creative works. No one understands this more than introverts.”

“Being introverted means I am not distracted by other people. In general, I am not concerned with what everyone else is doing.”

“I think creativity comes from within, and we are wired to look inside first.”

“As an introvert, I have a hard time expressing my feelings and prefer to do so with art.”

“I am able to be quiet and just take in the world, take in humanity and its essence, process it in the hundreds of ways that introverts do, and create something that speaks to the human in all of us.”

“I make the world inside my head come to life through art.”

## **What Introverts Bring to the Creative Process**

The numbers show that, generally, introverts are creative folks. Does this mean introverts are more creative than extroverts? That’s a tough question to answer. I know a lot of creative introverts, like Anna, who draws dinosaur comics, or Brandon, who started a podcast about dead ideas. I know creative extroverts, too, like Misha, who built a website where anyone can trade services sans currency, or Adrienne, who photographs bands. For every creative introvert I personally know, I can tick off an extrovert who is creative. I believe both introverts *and* extroverts can be creative. However, introverts may have an edge. According to studies by psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Gregory Feist, the most spectacularly creative people in a given field tend to be introverted. Although they’ve found a way to be “extroverted” enough to share ideas with others and advance their own projects, they still see themselves as individuals who run separate from the herd.

Perhaps the greatest strength introverts bring to the creative process is our ability to work alone. And it's not just that we're *capable* of working alone—we *relish* working alone. Solitude has long been linked to creativity. Pablo Picasso believed that artists could never accomplish any serious creative endeavor unless they worked alone. Likewise, psychologists agree that solitude is essential to doing our best creative work. The distinguished psychologist Hans Eysenck once noted that introversion and creativity go hand-in-hand because working alone allows a person to better concentrate on the task before them; also, spending less time with other people conserves energy for creative work. Conversations with others may inspire us, having new experiences may spark ideas, and our relationships may connect us to the greater whole, but it's in solitude that we excavate the riches of our hidden inner world.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Reed Larson, a professor of human development and family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, found that adolescents tend to report feeling less self-conscious when they're alone. In the 1990s, he gave teenagers beepers and checked in with them randomly throughout the day, asking them to record what they were doing, who they were with, and how they were feeling. Reed found that the teenagers did not report feeling happy *in the moment* when they were by themselves; however, they did report feeling better *after* they had spent time alone. Also, he found that when alone (away from the gaze of their peers), teens felt less self-conscious. This state of mind is important to creative work because it frees us up to follow artistic impulses. You probably can't come up with original ideas or let your emotions out in an authentic, expressive way if your mind is distracted with worries about what others think of you.

Another key to creativity is the ability to let your mind wander. Researchers have a name for when you zone out, daydream, or let your mind drift from topic to topic; they call it “creative incubation.” It means you're not consciously thinking about a problem, but your mind is still working on it in the background, like an app running on your smart phone even when you're not using it. Suddenly, while you're doing the dishes or taking a shower, an idea dawns on you—“aha!”—like a light bulb turning on. Who's great at turning inward, daydreaming, and letting their minds wander? Introverts.

Finally, introverts tend to be observers. We may not say much, but we notice a lot. How your friend's eyes flickered ever so slightly but guiltily when he swore he didn't intentionally forget to invite a mutual friend to his birthday party. The delicate way the sunlight casts shadows on the old stone wall. The crunchy reds, browns, and golds of fall leaves on the forest floor. All these observations tumble around in our minds and enrich our ideas.

## Famous Creative Introverts

- Shonda Rhimes, creator of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, who writes in her memoir that she's always been an introverted person who didn't go out to Hollywood parties
- David Letterman, long-time former host of the *Late Show*
- Harrison Ford, actor
- Gwyneth Paltrow, actress
- John Green, author of *The Fault in Our Stars*
- Elton John, musician
- Larry Page, co-founder of Google
- Emma Watson, actress
- Courtney Cox, actress, who calls herself a “homebody”
- Steven Spielberg, director and producer
- Felicia Day, actress, a self-professed introvert who writes in her memoir that she felt overwhelmed when she had to have people work for her
- Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook
- Audrey Hepburn, actress, who was quoted as saying, “I’m an introvert ... I love being by myself, love being outdoors, love taking a long walk with my dogs and looking at the trees, flowers, the sky”
- Meryl Streep, actress
- Dr. Seuss, author, who, according to Susan Cain, was afraid of meeting the children who read his books because he thought he would disappoint them with how quiet he was
- Frederic Chopin, composer, who only gave thirty public performances in his lifetime
- Lady Gaga, musician, who has said that she likes to keep to herself and focus on her music

## Harnessing the Creative Power of Solitude

It's not just researchers and psychologists who believe that solitude is crucial to creativity. Famous artists, writers, and innovators agree. For one, J. K. Rowling, a self-professed introvert, credits her “shy” nature with helping her come up with



Harry Potter. Maybe you've heard the story. She was riding on a train when suddenly the idea for the series popped into her head. (Sounds like "creative incubating" to me.) She was alone and didn't have a pen—but she was too shy to ask another passenger for one. Ultimately, she believes this was a good thing. Instead of trying to work out her ideas on paper, she simply sat back and thought for the length of the train ride—about four hours. The details of a "scrawny, black-haired, bespectacled boy" who didn't know he was a wizard bubbled up in her brain. If she had stopped to capture the ideas on paper, she might have slowed them down and stifled the creative process completely, Rowling explains on her blog.

Ernest Hemingway, one of the great American twentieth-century novelists, also believed in the creative power of solitude. In his 1954 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he said that when writers spend less time alone (i.e., are less "lonely"), the quality of their work declines. While organizations for writers give them opportunities to socialize, Hemingway doubted that they actually improved their writing.

Likewise, Steve Wozniak is also said to be an introvert. While working alone late at night, he invented the world's first user-friendly computer; he would later go on to co-found Apple with his extroverted counterpart, Steve Jobs. In his memoir, Wozniak writes that engineers and inventors are like artists, and, just like artists, they work best alone—not on a team, not in a corporate office, but alone.

Finally, there's Jeremy Messersmith. Creativity, for him, is "a lot of just sitting at the computer by myself." He tells me, "Art is a way for me as an introvert to dive into myself. It's self-exploration." He recently spent a whole summer writing songs alone in a gazebo. When he writes, he examines his personal experiences, sometimes diving into his childhood. And he believes his introversion helps make him more creative. "Creativity requires taking time for yourself and really examining and questioning yourself," he says. "I'm reminded of a quote by e. e. cummings I like a lot: 'The Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself.' I think introverts are uniquely equipped for that kind of inner voyage."

## **"Are You Okay?"—Resting Sad Face**

People are always asking Lauren Zazzara, "What's wrong?" Her friends, her family, her coworkers—people who know her well—will ask her this question even when everything is perfectly fine. That's because Lauren has something she

calls “Resting Sad Face.” You’ve probably heard of its counterpart, “Resting Bitch Face,” which is when someone looks mean or angry without intending to. Lauren, on the other hand, just looks unhappy.

“If I’m not up, it’s assumed I’m down,” she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. “Which makes me feel like it’s not okay to be anything other than what others feel I should be.”

Resting Sad (or Bitch) Face is often a by-product of mind-wandering or creative incubating. It can also happen when an introvert is doing nothing at all. For Lauren, it happens anytime she turns inward. It takes energy to act happy and excited when she’s around other people. When she’s not talking to someone, she returns to her inner introvert world. “I’m often told that I’m in my own world (which often results in me walking into things or other people, but that’s a whole other can of worms),” she explains. This is when people start asking her what’s wrong. She understands that it’s out of concern, but it gets old.

“It’s even more frustrating when I’m told to smile,” she writes. “Thinking isn’t really conducive to smiling, and in my opinion, it would be much stranger if I was pondering to myself with a huge grin on my face rather than my normal, concentrated look. Is it wrong for me to be just thinking? Why should I owe anyone a smile?”

This sort of thing happens to me all the time. But I would call my problem “Something’s Wrong” Face. In fact, on two different occasions while writing this book, one of my very extroverted neighbors approached me when I was working in my apartment’s common area. “Is everything okay?” he asked, interrupting my typing *and* my concentration. “You just have this look on your face like something bad is happening.” I had to summon all my patience to answer in an even tone, “Everything’s fine.” How ironic that he asked me this while I was literally writing a book about understanding introverts better.



THAT'S MY "THINKING" FACE!!



When you're in your inner world, what does your face look like? If you wear a sad or intense expression like Lauren and I do, welcome to the club.

## The Torture of Overthinking

Unfortunately, on the other side of mind-wandering, creative incubating, and daydreaming is something far more sinister: overthinking. According to psychotherapist Amy Morin, author of *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't*

*Do*, overthinking usually involves two destructive thought patterns: ruminating and worrying. Ruminating is when you rehash the past (“I shouldn’t have said that”), while worrying is when you make negative, often catastrophic, predictions about the future (“I’m going to embarrass myself on the date”). And often, overthinkers don’t just think in words; they conjure up terrifying images to accompany their thoughts—a devastating car crash or a vicious argument with a significant other.

Overthinking can also cause your brain to play a memory over and over again, like a song stuck on repeat. *Did I really mess up as badly as I thought I did?* you think. *What did he really mean when he reacted like that?* Like a detective, you’re trying to extract a key piece of information by going over the evidence again and again. Or you may imagine all the things you could have done differently. “I should have said *this*, not *that*” or “Why did I choose this college major? Or this job? Or this relationship?” Your brain becomes obsessed with past events you can’t change.

Ashley told me that her overthinking stems from feeling self-conscious. “I think too much about other people’s thoughts,” she says. “It prevents me from doing what I want for fear of how others will respond.” Christianne told me that she ruminates on things she could do or has done, even though she recognizes that this behavior is counterproductive. “It fuels my anxiety but doesn’t fix anything,” she says.

Other times, your imagination runs away with you. One moment you’re enjoying something pleasant, like a walk with your significant other, and the next moment a dark thought enters your mind. Jill says her overthinking usually starts small then spirals almost comically out of control. “One minute I’m thinking, *This song has a good life message*, and the next minute I’m planning my funeral slide show after I died heroically fighting the terrorists at the mall.”

## **What Overthinking Feels Like**

Everyone overthinks sometimes, even extroverts, but introverts are probably more prone to it. We may not even notice when we’re doing it because overthinking is like second nature to us—at least, that’s what several introverts told me. I asked introverts, “When you notice you’re doing it, what does overthinking feel like?” and this is what they said:

“Overthinking feels like having a million tabs open at once.”

—Tina

“Like a slap back to reality when you realize that you still have to have a difficult talk with someone after you have already had the conversation in your head, multiple times, in multiple different ways.”

—Tiffany

“It’s like a black hole that brings me deeper and deeper in. One choice spins me into a million possible outcomes or possibilities. I worry how my choices affect others or what will happen ten years from now.”

—Julie

“It feels like a fog when I’m in it, so much so that sometimes I’ll say something out loud from some made up scenario that had nothing to do with the present. It’s embarrassing even when I’m alone.”

—Nicole

“It feels like I’m incapacitated, and I can’t make a decision. I’m adaptable and strategic, so the combination of all the possibilities that could happen keep coming to the point where I don’t know what to do anymore. I tend to get anxious as a result. It’s not just decisions, but what people mean when they say stuff tends to lead to that anxiety and overthinking when it really can be nothing.”

—Hillary

“For me, it feels like your brain is at a busy intersection and all the traffic lights are blinking randomly. Truckloads of information zoom through without any sense of direction.”

—Robert

## **How Overthinking Harms You**

When you can’t get out of your head, it can put you in a state of anguish and take a serious toll on your well-being. Research published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* finds that dwelling on your shortcomings, mistakes, and problems increases your risk of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. And as your mental health declines, you tend to ruminate even *more*, leading to a nasty cycle that is difficult to break. Isabelle, a chronic overthinker, knows this all too well. “Overthinking causes me anxiety and depression, but it also makes me aloof and not very present,” she tells me. “I can zoom out of a conversation because my brain decides to go on a journey, and then I miss bits

and feel super guilty for being a lousy friend, sister, or partner, adding to the anxiety and depression. Honestly, nothing good has ever come from overthinking in my case.”

Overthinking can also keep you from being productive. Sally, another chronic overthinker, tells me, “Overthinking leads to being overwhelmed, which leads to inaction.” Likewise, Marianne says, “When I overthink, it brings more stress, and I feel paralyzed and unmotivated.” This results in a state of mind that can make it feel impossible to make decisions (even little ones), tackle your homework assignment, or check things off your mounting to-do list.

Worst of all, overthinking seems to strike at the most inconvenient times. Have you ever found yourself lying awake late at night, unable to sleep because you’re playing a mistake from five years ago over and over in your head? There’s absolutely nothing you can do about that situation now, but you can’t get to sleep because your mind won’t shut off. A study published in *Personality and Individual Differences* confirms this, showing that rumination and worry lead to poorer sleep quality and fewer hours of sleep. Overthinking is the worst.

## How to Stop Overthinking

How do you break the rumination cycle? It’s not easy, but with some effort, it can be done. Here are some ideas to help you break free of unproductive overthinking:

- 1. Notice when you’re overthinking.** Like I said, many introverts don’t even notice when they’re overthinking because it’s so normal for them. The first step is to simply start being aware of when you’re ruminating, and to recognize that this pattern of thinking is unproductive.
- 2. Try to put things in perspective.** This is easier said than done. That awkward thing you said at work really does seem awful right now. But before you conclude that your comment will get you fired, acknowledge that your thoughts may be exaggeratedly negative. In other words, you may be making a bigger deal out of the issue in your head than it really is. Train yourself to recognize and replace thinking errors before they work you into a wide-awake-at-two-in-the-morning frenzy of overthinking.
- 3. Change the channel.** Do something that disrupts your train of thought. Get out of the house and take a walk—sunlight boosts the levels of a natural antidepressant found in the brain. Listen to music. Talk to someone, even if it’s not about what’s currently on your mind. Do anything to get your mind

going down a different track.

**4. Breathe.** There's a reason why this advice is a common refrain of pop psychology—it really does reduce stress. The key is to breathe deeply from your abdomen, getting as much air as possible into your lungs. Try these techniques:

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should not move much.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can. At the same time, contract your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should not move much.
- Keep breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count s-l-o-w-l-y as you exhale.
- Then, imagine yourself letting go of whatever is bothering you.

**5. Take action.** When we get wrapped up in overthinking, we may put off making decisions (I'm guilty of this). We're looking for the "perfect" or "right" answer. But life is messy, and rarely will you be able to make a decision that has zero trade-offs. Sometimes making *any* decision is better than being stuck in indecision, especially when it comes to "little" things like if you should go to the social event or not. For bigger questions—like what college to attend or if you should stay with your partner—take small steps to move yourself forward. Only focus on one step at a time. If your choice doesn't feel right, you have permission to change your mind.

## In Closing

The little girl who saw her life as a movie also told stories to herself in her mind to help herself fall asleep at night. She wrote books on construction paper and entertained her cousins with games she made up. This girl grew up to be a teenager who daydreamed in class and wrote snatches of poetry in the margins of her math assignments. She stared out the window and thought big thoughts about the world. It eventually led her to write about topics she cared deeply about in an effort to help other people. I guess you could say I have always lived partly in this world and partly in the world of my mind. I believe I always will

and, as an introvert, I suspect that you will, too. Where will your inner world take you?



## Chapter 13

# WORK WITH YOUR INTROVERSION RATHER THAN FIGHT AGAINST IT

When Dave Rendall was a child, he was always trying to make people laugh. Hyperactive and attention-loving, he was the typical class clown. “I was a bad kid—at least, that’s what everyone told me,” Dave writes in his book, *The Freak Factor*. “I was told repeatedly I was obnoxious and immature, had a bad attitude, and lacked self-control. Even my parents called me ‘motormouth’ because of my nonstop chatter.” Because of comments like these, Dave didn’t have a lot of hope for the future. “You can only hear people tell you something is wrong with you for so long before you begin to believe them,” he writes.

His problems seemed to follow him almost everywhere he went. Only a few weeks into his job at a large nonprofit, his boss and a few colleagues sat him down. They had a lot of complaints about him. “I didn’t ask for their input, and I talked too much, too often, and for too long in meetings,” he writes. “I didn’t seem open to their involvement.” If Dave didn’t make some major changes soon, his boss told him, he’d be out of a job.

Seeing the writing on the wall, Dave quit and took another position. But things weren’t much better there. His work style clashed with his boss’s. As a result, he was constantly frustrated and irritable. His weight began to balloon as his eating habits and sleep patterns deteriorated, and every day became a battle. Once again, Dave’s boss gave him the “change your ways or else” talk. That’s when it hit him—he needed a drastically different approach.

At that point, Dave could have gone down the traditional self-development route, which is to focus on fixing your weaknesses. Instead, he chose a different way. “I didn’t improve by overcoming my weaknesses,” he writes. “I didn’t

really change myself at all. I succeeded by *flaunting* my weaknesses and *finding situations* that valued the positive side of my apparent flaws.”

Think about that for a moment. Instead of changing himself, he changed his situation.

Dave quit his job as a manager and started working as a college professor. This change allowed him to teach two of his favorite topics: strategy and managing change. He also started a business that helped companies with strategic planning. He found that his clients appreciated his strategic thinking and ability to help them see the big picture. Gradually he transitioned from consulting to training to professional speaking. Today, he’s a successful speaker and author. He’s spoken to audiences on every inhabited continent. He’s given talks to the United States Air Force and the Australian government, as well as to numerous Fortune 500 companies, like AT&T, State Farm, Ralph Lauren, and GlaxoSmithKline. As a keynote speaker, he’s often praised for his energy and enthusiasm. He believes his passion helps him connect with his audience.

Dave loves it. And he’s gotten his health and sanity back. “I’ve lost weight and started running marathons, ultramarathons, and triathlons,” he writes. “I feel energized and confident. My work provides me with happiness, fulfillment, and a sense that I have truly found my calling.”

No one criticizes Dave for his weaknesses anymore. But don’t get him wrong. He’ll be the first to tell you that all his old flaws are still there. His flaws just don’t matter anymore.

## **“What Makes You Weird Also Makes You Wonderful”**

I’ve met Dave, and I can tell you that he’s very much an extrovert. He’s the kind of guy you can’t miss. He’s over six feet tall and loves wearing anything pink—pink shoes, pink suit coat, you name it. He has a lot of energy, and when he gets on stage to speak, people listen. You probably can’t relate to some parts of his story (being overly talkative and attention-loving). Nevertheless, I wanted to share it with you. Like many introverts, Dave, too, had some aspects of his temperament that seemed to be less than ideal. Troublesome, even.

I share Dave’s story because he did something that is counterintuitive for most people—and it worked. He didn’t take the approach that is normally recommended for improving oneself. He didn’t make a five-step plan to talk less. He didn’t meditate on the mantra, “Calm down and stop talking, calm down and stop talking ...” Instead of focusing on his weaknesses, he leaned into the things that he was already good at. Job-wise, he went where he was celebrated,

not just tolerated.

There's a powerful lesson in Dave's story for all of us.

Don't get me wrong. There's immense value in improving your skills. Becoming a teacher forced me to become more comfortable with the spotlight. Going on dates helped me get better at the give-and-take of conversation. Likewise, Andre made a plan to improve his social skills ([Chapter 2](#)), Shawna decided to make more friends when she moved to a new city ([Chapter 5](#)), and Katrina worked on her networking abilities ([Chapter 11](#)). That's not the kind of self-improvement—improving some basic skills if they're lacking—that I'm talking about here.

Dave likes to say, “What makes us weird also makes us wonderful. What makes us weak also makes us strong.” In other words, on the other side of your weaknesses are your strengths. This advice can apply to anyone, of any temperament or personality. But here, I'm going to apply it to introverts. So you're quiet and you don't always know what to say? On the other side of that “weakness” is a powerful, analytical mind. You get overstimulated more easily than others? In your solitude, you solve problems, think of new ideas, and create. You “umm” and “ahh” when you speak? Your reflective mind processes things deeply. Instead of seeing your introvert qualities as your biggest flaws, consider that they may actually be your biggest strengths.

Do keep on improving your skills and work on the things that hold you back. You can do it. But make sure you don't miss the big picture—seeking situations that play to your natural strengths. That's how you'll get ahead and build the kind of life you really want. Job-wise, find a career that demands that you use your introvert skills, whether it's social work, social media, leading a company, or building your own. When it comes to the close relationships in your life, surround yourself with only those who energize you, not drain you. Your good friends and significant other should leave you feeling richer and fuller after being around them. You have no obligation to maintain one-sided friendships or toxic relationships.

Introverts have a tendency to internalize things. When there's a problem in our lives, we turn inward and point the finger of blame squarely at ourselves. There's nothing wrong with taking responsibility for your actions; in fact, I believe the world would be a better place if everyone had a strong sense of personal responsibility. But many introverts go overboard in this area. When we find ourselves in a soul-sucking job or a draining relationship, the first thing some of us do is try to adapt *ourselves* to the situation. We bend to everyone else's needs and forget about our own. While being adaptable can be a good thing, being *too* adaptable can be downright dangerous. It means you start living

inauthentically. It means you bend so much that you don't recognize yourself anymore. And this can lead to a life of perpetual exhaustion.

Change your situation, change your life.

## **Your Needs Are Just as Important as Everyone Else's Needs**

As this book comes to a close, I'd like to leave you with three big ideas. The first one is this: Your needs are just as important as everyone else's.

A few years ago, Lauren Sapala worked for a small start-up. The company had a tight budget, so Lauren found herself crammed into a tiny office with ten other people. "The woman who sat next to me wore a strong perfume that reminded me of the candle store in the mall," she writes in an *Introvert, Dear* article. "Usually by mid-morning, I had the beginnings of a throbbing headache, and by the end of the afternoon, I was downright nauseous."

At this point in Lauren's life, she hadn't yet discovered that she is an introvert (as well as a highly sensitive person). "I just knew that I did not mix well with strong smells, loud noises, or crowded places. I was prone to headaches and anxiety, and something as simple as a strobe light could set me off." Even though this woman's perfume seemed like such a small thing, it was wreaking havoc on her daily life.

Lauren had become close with one of her coworkers who was very similar to Lauren—intuitive, people-oriented, and sensitive. The difference was her friend was an extrovert, and she had a different take on the perfume lady. When Lauren told her about it, she said simply, "Why don't you ask her not to wear that perfume to work anymore? Tell her it bothers you."

Lauren was stunned, and speechless. "That was *allowed*?" she writes. "I could ask other people to modify something because it was causing me a problem? Rationally, I understood this concept. But emotionally, it felt like my entire world had shifted."

## **When You Have to Speak Up**

It's not uncommon for introverts—especially sensitive, intuitive introverts like Lauren who are very tuned into people—to not speak up for their own needs. When you're an introvert who notices *everything* about people—like their tone of voice, their body language, the look in their eyes, and the words they're *not* saying—you notice how they react to you, too. You notice when you're making them slightly uncomfortable. When you're inconveniencing them, even if they

aren't saying so. If you're an introvert who has a high level of empathy (as many introverts do), you put yourself in their shoes. How would they feel if you told them to stop wearing that perfume? Because you think a lot about other people's feelings, you try to be as considerate as possible.

The problem with always putting other people first is that your needs can get overlooked. People may not even know they're doing it, because you're working hard not to show that you need something. You're hoping that somehow, intuitively, they'll just read your mind. As a sensitive introvert, you tend to pick up on little cues, so naturally you expect that others will, too. Sadly, this isn't usually the case. It's like what happened with Lauren. The perfume lady didn't even know she was causing a problem that was wrecking her day—again and again.

Lauren writes that speaking up for ourselves is hard because it brings up emotional baggage from the past. "Most of us have felt for our entire lives that our personal needs are weird and inconvenient to others," she writes. "We need more space than other people. We need more time. We need more complexity, and more depth. Because other people are often confused by these needs, or can even feel rejected in some way, we learn as children to compromise on them constantly. So, instead of figuring out how to negotiate with others for what we need, we withdraw further into our inner world, attempting to meet all of our needs there, totally on our own."

Some people seem to naturally stand up for their needs. This trait is apparent in the way they walk, talk, and even look at others. Bullies and emotionally needy people steer clear of them. Instead, they prey on another type of individual—the person whose gaze is at their shoes, who apologizes even when it's not their fault, and who works to keep the peace, no matter what need of theirs must be sacrificed.

When you stand up for your needs, you may get reactions from other people that aren't fun to deal with. But there's power in saying the truth. Although people might not like what you say, your honesty shows them something important: that you care enough about the relationship that you're willing to be vulnerable and real with them. You may find that when you speak up for your needs, people respect you more. It shows you value yourself and believe you're worthy of respect. When you see yourself as a person who is worthy of respect, others will, too.

If you're committed to living your best life, speaking up for your needs must be done. "The more you do it, the more you'll be able to readily identify what's yours, what belongs to other people, and how to draw the line between the two," says Lauren. "You'll come to a place where you step into your own power

consistently, with passion and purpose. And when you look into the mirror, you'll respect the person looking back at you."

If you're an introvert who struggles to speak up, remember that your needs are just as important as everyone else's. You're a part of "everyone." You matter, too.

## **Live Fearlessly**

When Susan Cain walked onto the TED stage in 2012 to give her now famous talk, "The Power of Introverts," she made the whole thing look easy. Carrying no notes, she opened with a story about summer camp and went on to perform a camp cheer. Then, before an audience of 1,500 people, she critiqued a society that favors the kind of person who craves an audience. Her talk was a smash hit—she received a standing ovation. And her message continues to resonate today; at the time of writing this book, her speech has almost sixteen million views online, according to [TED.com](https://www.ted.com).

But it wasn't easy. Even twenty-four hours before her talk, she was tweaking her speech and re-memorizing parts of it. Prior to that, she had joined Toastmasters, an organization whose members meet weekly to practice public speaking. Also, she had scheduled a two-hour crash course with TED's speaking coach, who gave her voice and breath exercises. As the date of her talk came closer, Susan suffered a few sleepless nights. She started to wonder if she'd rather *die* than give this talk.

I made the mistake of asking Susan if she was nervous when the day of her talk arrived. "Was I nervous? Was I nervous?" she responded. "Oh yes. I was in a full-on state of panic." She tells me she "literally couldn't have done it" without the week of prep she did beforehand with a very emotionally sensitive and attuned acting coach, Jim Fyfe. "And I also couldn't have done it if I had felt that there was any other alternative. But who's going to say no to giving a TED talk about a subject she's so passionate about—that she's just devoted the last seven years of her life to writing a book about? So really, there was no choice," she says. "I had to do it!" And then, almost miraculously, in the months and years following the TED talk, her fear of public speaking mostly dissolved. "I say mostly because it's still a bit uncomfortable—but within a totally manageable zone," she tells me.

How did she transform herself into someone who no longer panics about public speaking? "The key is that you have to expose yourself to the thing you fear in small, manageable chunks," she advises. "Do not start your public

speaking career with a TED talk! Start it by standing up in front of your two best friends and telling them what you had for dinner. You can ratchet it up from there. It really is possible! I know this because I was the person who, ten years ago, would have told you that it wasn't.

Musician jeremy messersmith did something similar. He began his career as a performer playing in coffee shops. "Every gig you play leads to the next gig," he tells me. "You start small and make incremental changes." By the time he found himself performing live on the *Late Show* for millions of viewers, he says he wasn't even that nervous. He had done enough preparation. "It felt like I was an athlete, and I'd been working up to this for a long time," he says.

You may not be giving a TED talk or performing on live television. But there are probably plenty of other things you face every day that make you nervous or put you in a full-on state of panic, like Susan. You may want to step out of your comfort zone and make a few new friends. You might want to say hello to that cute girl in your class. You may want to share your ideas in a staff meeting because you know they'll improve things. Whatever it is, don't let fear be the reason not to do it. Like Susan and jeremy, you can start small and slowly work your way up to the thing that scares you.

The second big idea I want to leave you with is this: live fearlessly. Of course, this doesn't mean you won't *feel* fear. You'll probably still feel plenty of it. But you never have to *give in* to those feelings. You can still speak up or reach out. Remember that your feelings of fear are just that—feelings. You don't have to listen to them. That's what living fearlessly is about.

## More Resources

If you've enjoyed this book, visit [IntrovertDear.com/SecretLives](http://IntrovertDear.com/SecretLives). I've put more resources for you there—and some ways you can connect with other introverts.

## Be as You Are

One day in eighth grade, while shopping with my friends at the mall, I found a blue T-shirt with the words "Be As You Are" printed on it. The shirt was not quite the right size for me—it was just a little bit too small. As a result, it stretched awkwardly across my chest, and I had to constantly keep pulling it

down so my belly wouldn't peek out. My friends tried to talk me out of it. "Why would you want a shirt like *that*?" they giggled. But I bought it anyway. I wore it all the time, even for my class picture that year. Imagine this: a nerdy girl with a bad perm, acne, and glasses, wearing a tiny shirt. There was only the hint of a smile on my lips. It's a strange-looking picture, but looking at it reminds me of how far I've come.

I didn't fully understand it, but even then, I felt like that T-shirt held a secret to life. Many people were telling me to "come out of my shell" and "stop being so quiet." Other middle schoolers laughed and joked and talked with ease. They didn't hide away in their bedrooms—writing poetry, reading mystery novels, and daydreaming—when there was social fun to be had. I guess that T-shirt was the message to myself that I needed to hear. It just took me all these years to decipher it.

I still believe that tiny T-shirt holds a secret to life. So my last big idea for you is this: be as you are. If you like staying in on a Friday night, then stay in. If you need quiet time, then take it. Don't perpetually wear an extroverted mask because you think that's what you're supposed to do. If you do, you might find yourself deeply unfulfilled and unhappy, divorced from what really makes you *you*. You might find yourself in the situation *I* found myself in during my younger years—you might believe there is something seriously wrong with you. Rather than fighting your introverted nature, start working with it.

This advice may seem contradictory to what I just suggested about living fearlessly. But it's not. Living fearlessly is about not letting fear hold you back from the things you want. "Be as you are" is about giving yourself permission for quiet. Permission to be you, introversion and all.



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