

The Perks of Being a Wallflower

Wielding the loudest bullhorn doesn't always get the job done. Studies show that the less outgoing of us can actually achieve more, faster. There truly are benefits to being an introvert.

BY [SUNSHINE FLINT](#) | [MARCH 2013](#)

When Monica Leal was tasked with interviewing a wildlife photographer for her college radio show, she went to his exhibit, but failed to get the scoop. "He was so busy and surrounded by so many people, I couldn't step out of my comfort zone," admits the L.A.-based artist's assistant, who self-describes as an introvert (a label her therapist agrees with). "I am not shy, I have lots of friends. But people in general make me very tired. It is by myself that I feel the most comfortable."

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Background: Corbis; Legs: Sung-Il Kim/Corbis

Some of the most famous faces are introverts. But we snuck some extroverts into the mix for fun. Can you spot them? For answers, click on the famous faces below.

A healthy portion of Americans agree. According to recent studies, introverts—defined as inner-directed people who tend to seek lower levels of interaction with others—make up 30 percent of the population. But while we have been conditioned to believe the extrovert, someone who is externally focused and requires the stimulation of other people, is more primed for success, the opposite appears to be true. Albert Einstein? Warren Buffett? Steven Spielberg? Eleanor Roosevelt? All introverts.

So why is introversion perceived as a problem rather than a positive? "There is the assumption that it is bad to be an introvert," says Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. "Our society is set up for extroverts, with forced collaborations in the workplace and team sports, but introverts have so much to contribute. They are creative, conscientious, and persistent. They will inspect a problem longer than an extrovert."

The chemistry proves it. "Introverts are not constantly in need of stimulation [like extroverts]; they already have dopamine circulating in their brain," explains Deniz Ones, Ph.D., Hellervik Chair of Industrial Psychology at the University of Minnesota. "They do not need external stimuli like others to experience happiness." This isn't to say that they don't like being around people, or even are shy; they simply prefer smaller gatherings to larger ones and accomplishing a task alone, rather than in a group. "It is just a matter of how much participation we can handle," says Sophia Dembling, author of the new book *The Introvert's Way: Living a Quiet Life in a Noisy World*. "For example, a cocktail party where I have to network is hard, but I do great at a sit-down dinner." In

EXTRAVERSION (which includes extroversion and introversion), one of the five major personality traits, is classified within the OCEAN criteria: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. The questions below aren't scientifically based, but a quick guide to where you might fall on the Extraversion continuum.

QUIZ: Are you an introvert?

Answer Yes/No

1. Do you find social situations draining?
2. Do you prefer tête-a-têtes to parties?
3. Do you seek out solitude or solitary activities?
4. Do you prefer doing activities on your own over doing them with others?
5. Are you grouchy if you are around people for too long?
6. Do you have a few, very good, deep friendships?
7. Do you let your voice mail pick up phone calls?
8. Do you like to entertain at home, but don't want people to stay over long?
9. Do you do your best work alone?
10. Do you observe an activity before joining in?



other words, it is wrong to say introverts are shy, dislike people, and are antisocial. Many shy people have social anxiety or fear they will be judged by others; while there are definitely shy introverts, many are quite capable of enjoying a party, they just don't want to be the center of it. "The issue isn't which is better," says Dembling, "but whether we should judge social success solely by extrovert criteria."

If you answered yes more than no, congratulations! You may be an introvert.

Through brainstorming sessions or working the room at an event, society pushes introverts to act like extroverts. And no wonder. Extrovert traits of gregariousness, connection-making, and sheer volubility became valuable when we moved from small towns to big cities a century ago and needed to stand out among strangers. When it came to managers and bosses in particular, "introversion became seen as a liability," says Stephan Dilchert, Ph.D., assistant professor of management at the Zicklin School of Business at Baruch College/CUNY, who along with Dr. Ones has studied employees and the relationship between personality and success. "Managers and CEOs, as a group, are typically extroverts," he says. However, he adds, successful introverts can compensate for their lack of dominance and energy by displaying traits like agreeableness and empathy. "Some introverted leaders are highly emotionally stable and are known for their lack of ups and downs."

While introverts may not be the life of the party or give great phone, they can and do flourish in interpersonal relationships. They're expert listeners, since they do less talking, and they're patient. Another plus: "Introverts are less likely to talk about people with others," says Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Ph.D, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author of the Fulfillment at Any Age blog on personality and aging on the *Psychology Today* website. "They don't push themselves on other people, since they're not as demanding of attention."

Introverts are likely to observe a situation before joining in, and this circumspection allows them time and space to come up with interesting topics of conversation. Leal, the L.A.-based artist's assistant, confirms this assessment. "When I meet new people, I study how they talk and act," she says. "Usually I am well-liked because I make sure everyone gets their needs met." They also don't require everyone to like them, valuing quality in friendships over quantity. "They invest a lot in each relationship," says Dembling. "They are very loyal and engaged."

Introverts can and will act against type when the situation calls for it. In fact, it is good for an introvert to go against the grain, say experts. "It's healthy to step out of character for work or for people that you love," explains Cain. Those acts often push loner-types to see their reflected glory in others' eyes. Take Merritt Martin, a copywriter and self-diagnosed introvert. She agreed without hesitation to be a bridesmaid at her friend's wedding, even though she "knew I'd need to mentally prep for the social hour, but being with my dear friends and a part of the experience outweighed that."

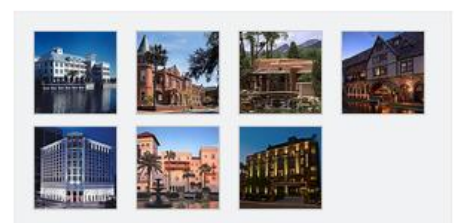
At work, introverts bring qualities like creativity, focus, conscientiousness, and out-of-the-box thinking that managers and employers often overlook—at their peril. They have the ability to concentrate on problems and are persistent in their approach. "Introverts will work longer than extroverts will," says Cain. Steve Wozniack created the Apple computer working solo in a garage; James Dyson made more than 5,000 prototypes of his vacuum alone before inventing the perfect machine. Extroverts might have given up without cheerleading squads to validate their success.

In other words, give them a bit of space, and introverts can tap into their creativity. A group brainstorming session won't work, since competing for dominance in a meeting is anathema to the introvert's thinking. "Creativity is one domain in which people who are more introspective can be more successful," says Dilchert. "When creativity doesn't require other people, introverts can be successful innovators."

Researchers have found that the best results for musicians, athletes, and chess competitors come from training solo. Introverts are already internally focused, they say, so it is easier for them to concentrate intensely while working alone. Maybe we can all learn a little from an introvert. But how?



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Channel the introvert advantage: They are excellent observers and listeners.

"Sometimes you learn incredibly important and useful things when you stop talking, step back, and pay attention," says Dembling. Carve out restorative times and niches for yourself where you can be creative, alone. Write down your ideas—a notebook, a reminder on your iPad—and then follow through. Think before you speak. "If an introvert doesn't work the room, has he failed at party going?" asks Dembling. "Only if he is trying to be an extrovert. If not, he left the party (probably early) feeling pleased with the experience. That's success." And be persistent, even if it isn't the way most of the world goes about doing things.

After she failed to interview the photographer, Leal tracked him down, but not via telephone. "I emailed and asked if I could interview him in person," she recalls. "Not only did he say yes, but he ended up inviting me to be his assistant on a shoot to photograph gray whales in Guerrero Negro in Baja California."

Her introvert's way of getting what she needed got her even more than she expected.