

Isolation and the introvert

It's easy to assume that the introverts in your team are thriving during isolation. But as *Janine Garner* explains, they still need your support to feel a sense of connectedness and belonging.

Introversion and extroversion are at the heart of human nature. The Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung said: "There is no such thing as a pure introvert or extrovert. Such a person would be in a lunatic asylum". There is, however, a general agreement that many of us fall somewhere along the introversion-extroversion spectrum with those falling smack bang in the middle described as 'ambiverts'.

The best way to self-diagnose is to consider where you felt the most energised pre-COVID-19. Did you find yourself more energised amongst groups of people, enjoying the interaction and loving the noise of multiple conversations? Or did you prefer time alone to re-energise, enjoying the silence and space to be alone with your thoughts, reading a book, writing or taking a walk? If your preference is the latter, you tend to err on the side of introversion.

The power of one

Given their preference for solitude, one has to consider whether this age of social distancing and isolation is actually an introvert's paradise. Introverts may be embracing the forced solitude after years of creatively finding ways to avoid large group get-togethers, the 'must attend' team away-days and 'get to know each other' networking dinners. The reduced obligation to people may have created a new-found freedom for them. The reduced need to enter the extrovert world of busy cafes, crowded shops, bustling streets and diary-jammed office days has reduced the noisy busyness of life.

As one self-proclaimed introvert colleague of mine shared: "I am feeling better about some of the consequential changes. More meaningful connections, more people helping each other, more local focus and support for businesses in our community, less traffic and crowds. I feel myself recharging in the quiet sanctuary of home. The kind of interaction we're having is easier to manage – phone calls and messages now feel more sincere and deliberate than before."



Too much of a good thing

It would appear that the introverts amongst us have an inner resilience that fuels their love of isolation and ability to cope with this new world of working from home. But are introverts also challenged by this increasingly uncertain and isolated world?

When I asked futurist, thought-leader and self-proclaimed introvert Dan Gregory about the challenges of introversion, he shared this insight: "The risk for introverts is for them to go all in on this and to become reclusive. It's very easy to get lost in your thoughts and overthink everything. So, for me, some kind of cognitive interrupt, be it physical or virtual, is important to pull me out of my own mind."

In 1943 Abraham Maslow proposed the theory of hierarchy of needs. After the physiological need for food and water and a need for safety, he suggested the third need as belonging. Belonging, the need for connectedness and togetherness, is a pure basic human need. If we forget to intentionally reach out to others, connect and nurture relationships around us, the resulting isolation and disconnection will impact our individual health and wellbeing irrespective of whether we're an introvert or an extrovert.

What can leaders do to support the connection needs of the introverts in their team? Here are three ideas:

Big isn't always better

As much as virtual platforms are creating opportunities to connect on a large scale,

the risk is hundreds of virtual faces listening to a one-way conversation. Schedule smaller, more intimate meetings, creating a safer environment for introverts to speak openly and engage in deeper conversation.

Be intentional and interested

Diarise one-on-one calls with a focus on building relationships and putting care first. Ask how people are really feeling? Explore what is really going on, listen deeply and be interested in finding out what you can do to help. Get serious about discovering the habits that bring the introverts in your team joy. What are they reading? What do they enjoy thinking about? How do they re-energise? And remember sometimes the very things that fuel introverts are the things they can no longer do due to isolation.

Schedule exploration time

Introverts welcome the opportunity to question and to think deeply about their work. Create the space and time to discuss projects, facilitate debate and curiosity versus skirting through a task list or timeline.

Despite the social bandwidth of introverts being less than that of extroverts, introverts fundamentally crave in-person connection and deep conversation as much as everyone else. As Dan Gregory shared with me: "It's almost like living on a diet of ice cream. I crave and love alone time, but too much isn't good for my health."



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