

The rise of the introvert — or is it?

By Janine Garner, XXX, XXX



- Introverts have an inner resilience that fuels the ability to cope with this new world of working from home.
- However, do not overlook an introvert's need for connection and deep conversation.
- This article outlines three suggestions for leaders to support the connection needs of the introverts in their team.



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 introvert-extrovert 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.

Given the preference for solitude, one has to consider whether this age of physical distancing and isolation is actually an introvert's paradise. After all, introverts have spent their entire lives embracing the equivalent of the distanced elbow tap having recoiled for years as the 'hugger' rushes up to wrap their arms tightly around them. They 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. Perhaps they no longer feel the pressure of strategising how to slink away unnoticed for the sanctuary of their own space. And maybe their natural anxiety levels around how to introduce themselves and engaging in society's need for interesting small talk have all but disappeared.

The reduced obligation to people may have created a new-found freedom for introverts.

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.'

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 Dan Gregory, another self-proclaimed introvert who you may have seen on *The Gruen Transfer*, about the challenges he observed, '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 interruption, be it physical or virtual is important to pull me out of my own mind.'

Another friend added, 'At the moment, what I miss is the ability to catch up with a couple of good friends and have a good conversation, but even that's not possible now.'

If we forget to intentionally reach out to others, connect and nurture relationships around us, the resulting isolation and disconnection will have further reaching ramifications on our individual health and well-being irrespective of whether an introvert or extrovert.

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 have further reaching ramifications on our individual health and well-being irrespective of whether an introvert or extrovert.

Author Amelia S Worsley said, 'Modern loneliness isn't just about being physically removed from other people. Instead, it's an emotional state of feeling apart from others — without necessarily being so'.

So, what can leaders do to support the connection needs of the introverts in their team. Here are three ideas:

1. 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 one-way conversation. Schedule smaller, more intimate meetings, creating a safer environment for introverts to speak openly and engage in deeper conversation.
2. 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.
3. 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 their fellow 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 your health.’

It is ultimately our sense of belong, of connectedness, of togetherness that matters.

Janine Garner can be contacted on XXX or by email at XXX

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