

The Power Of Introverts

Why it's time for the world to embrace the quiet.

Words by **Kelly Exeter**



Picture this. You're at work, and you're fuming. For the second time in six months, you've been overlooked for a promotion in favour of someone you consider to be a bit of a schmoozer. Sure, they can talk the talk, but you're the one that walks the walk. Why does this keep happening?

You leave the office in a funk, and once home, all you want is some space to reflect and chill out, but your partner is clamouring for your attention. You snap at him, which causes a huge fight, so you lock yourself in the bedroom until you've regained enough equilibrium to face what remains of the day.

If this sounds familiar, it's likely that you're on the introverted end of a spectrum first popularised by Carl Jung in the 1920s. It's also likely that you find yourself constantly at odds with your preference for quiet and reflection, because right now, we live in a world dominated by the extrovert ideal. It's

a world that celebrates those who have charismatic, forceful personalities and thrive in the company of others.

THE QUIET MINORITY

There is, however, a countermovement on the rise, and at its head is the soft-spoken, former corporate lawyer Susan Cain. Her book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, hit *The New York Times* bestseller list soon after its release in January 2012 and has been there ever since.

Why is a book celebrating and validating introversion causing such resonance? Cain's theory is this: "One-third to one-half of the population is introverted – that's an awful lot of people eager to hear that their personality style is a lot more powerful than society would have them believe," she writes.

Absurd as it may seem, introversion is currently quite stigmatised in Western society. In the workplace, quiet individuals find it hard to make

themselves heard and find that their achievements are often overlooked. For adults, society sees an aversion to hitting pubs and clubs every weekend night as antisocial. Even children find themselves in the firing line.

"Every day, I hear from readers whose loving and well-intentioned parents asked them to be more like their extroverted siblings or classmates, to spend less time with the riches inside their own head. These parents were concerned that too quiet a childhood might lead to a future of loneliness," Cain writes.

This is a common mistake that both society and parents of introverts in general make – equating quietness with shyness. Nathalie Brown, a child-behaviour consultant from Melbourne, highlights the differences between the two. "Shyness indicates some level of anxiety and worry in a social scenario, which is quite common and just part of someone's internal make-up, whereas

“One-third to one-half of the population is introverted - that’s an awful lot of people eager to hear that their personality style is a lot more powerful than society would have them believe.”

introversion is about how comfortable someone feels with the amount of stimulation going on around them,” says Brown. “A shy child will stand back from the main group and just watch, building up the courage to join in. The introvert child, however, is very happy and confident playing on their own. They also tend to have amazing imaginations and creativity.” Brown’s suggestion for parents of introverted children? “Give them time to adjust to busy situations, and don’t miss the chance to encourage the wonderful imagination they possess.”

Another gap in our knowledge of introverts versus extroverts is that genuine energy issues are at play. Melissa Hughes, a Sydney-based relationship counsellor, explains: “An extrovert will feel energised by spending time with others, while introverts gain their energy by spending more quiet reflective time alone.”

A COUPLE OF PERSONALITIES

Kristen and Tom* are a couple who have benefited greatly from this insight into their respective personalities. Kristen has a full-time, fast-paced role in marketing and sales, while Tom works in a fairly solitary role as a fitter and machinist. Kristen’s job might indicate she is more of an extrovert, but in fact, the opposite is true. She operates admirably and successfully in her work environment, but once she arrives home, Kristen craves peace and quiet. Tom, an extrovert who is spending most of his day in isolation, longs for lengthy conversation and interaction.

Hughes proposes a solution: “To meet each other’s needs and ensure the viability of their relationship, at some point in the evening, Kristen has to give time and energy to Tom. Similarly,

Tom knows that at the beginning of the evening, he has to be patient and first wait for Kristen to recharge.”

An understanding of the energy differences between introverts and extroverts can also pay huge dividends in the workplace. Modern office spaces are often open-plan and noisy, which forces most introverts to operate as pseudoextroverts or face the risk of stalling on their climb up the corporate ladder.

Perth psychologist Gemma Downie says that for these individuals, it’s like being required to write constantly with their nonpreferred hand. “Even though it doesn’t feel natural, they can do it, but once they’ve been doing it for a while, their hand will get tired. However, if they’re given the chance to revert to their preferred hand for a little while, this gives them the energy they need to pick back up with their nonpreferred hand again.”

Companies such as Google understand this and have introduced

the strategy of “hot-desking,” which allows individuals to choose a location that is conducive to their energy needs. Introverts who need some clear space to think and recharge can move their laptops to quiet workstations. When they need to collaborate with other colleagues, they can move back to a more communal space.

This is music to Cain’s ears; the biggest goal she has for *Quiet* is that it encourages the restructuring of schools and workplaces to get the best out of both introverts and extroverts.

Her other dream is to change the way Western society views introversion and the way introverts see themselves.

Given that the prevailing piece of feedback she gets from readers of *Quiet* is “Finally, I have permission to be who I am!” it would seem that Cain’s dreams are well on their way to coming true. Introverts are finally starting to recognise the power of their personalities. 

While extroverts feel energised spending time with others, introverts revive their energy by spending time alone.

