

Introversion

I will discuss introversion.

I will start by explaining what it is, and a little about what it is not.

I will talk a little about the problems introverts may face, and how that could affect children as well as adults.

I will end with a couple of wishes.

I am an introvert.

My wife, Ann-Marie, is an extreme extrovert.

We have one child, Celina. She is in between.

So, what is an introvert?

An introvert is somebody who's comfortable with very little external stimulation - somebody who likes the company of him- or herself.

Extroverts on the other hand get their kicks from others. They would prefer that a party have many people, while an introvert prefers small gatherings of good friends for deeper conversations.

Once when I was 14 I came back from a long vacation. A friend of mine – an extrovert – asked me if hadn't gone crazy, longing for friends at home. I couldn't understand his point – I would have liked to stay longer, and didn't feel any need to call up friends at home.

There are differences between countries as well. Asian countries are usually considered to be more introverted. Europe is generally more extroverted, Sweden and some others being exceptions. The most extroverted country is probably the US. I quickly found that out a shocking way while an exchange student in high school – at an American style pep rally...

You may be an introvert if:

- You hate small-talk
- You can count good friends on your fingers, and still have fingers left over
- You prefer e-mails to phone calls
- You dislike conflict
- You cross the street in order to not have to meet friends. As opposed to an extrovert who crosses a parking lot, finds a new friend and invites them over for dinner (my wife this past weekend).
- You feel good being left alone now and then. My wife and daughter just came back from three weeks in Sweden. During their trip I lived much like a hermit, recharging.

These are generalizations of course. My wife and I may represent different extremes, but most people lie on a curve in between. There are estimates suggesting that about a quarter to a third of all people are introverts.

In a Toastmasters group like ours, I would expect that number to be even higher.

Introverts are often good at acting like extroverts though. Modern western societies idolize extroversion to such a degree that introverts almost *have* to put on a facade.

What introverts are not:

- Introverts are not antisocial
- Introverts are not snobbish
- Introversion is not the same as shyness

I remember when I was little, people used to say that I was shy (which still happens sometimes). I did not agree. I couldn't explain why though, as I had never heard of introversion.

I was different, and I didn't really like that, but I didn't believe that I was shy - it was just that I didn't have much to say. When I did, I talked. And I wasn't shy in other respects. I could perform and sing in front of people. I still prefer public singing to public speaking. When you sing you have a tune to follow and a memorized song. Talking is unpredictable...

Introversion and shyness are both social conditions though. They both originate from a sensitive temperament, and it's easy to see how they can be confused.

Simply put, a shy person is somebody who would like to, but is afraid to say things. An introvert is somebody who just doesn't have anything to say, or care about saying it. Shyness is painful. Introversion is not.

Many shy people probably are introverts too. However, there are shy extroverts - Barbara Streisand and David Letterman are regarded as two such people. There are also non-shy introverts. Think Bill Gates.

Now, it's not that extroversion is bad. But introversion isn't bad either. Instead of suppressing it we need to benefit from it. I like to think of my marriage as a good combination of the two. I'm organized and take care of details. She makes sure I sometimes meet friends.

Or think of extrovert Steve Jobs teaming up with introvert Steve Wozniak – they were a pretty successful team – benefitting from each other.

I wish people would credit introversion more, starting in school. I'm sad to see that schools today are geared toward, and promote, extroverted kids, even though introverts generally get better grades. Today, desks are not facing the same direction. They are organized in small pods of 4-6 kids who are supposed to all work together. While that might be good sometimes, it's also essential to teach them to be individuals and to think for themselves. After all, some of the world's greatest thinkers and artists have been introverts. Before the 20th century, societies, including the US, celebrated introversion.

And it continues after school. Nowadays office people are expected to benefit from sitting in open work places. I know for a fact that I am more productive if I can have a door I can close, so that I can concentrate. And think of extroverted ideas such as brainstorming. It's been proven that they aren't effective, but they keep occurring. A better method is for people to think individually, come up with ideas, and then meet to discuss them.

Introverted workers are often passed over for promotion – not being very good at promoting themselves. This is in spite of the fact that introverts often make better leaders than extroverts.

I'll end with a couple of wishes for the world:

- Stop group-think obsession - both for adults and for kids
- If you're in a extrovert-introvert relationship, personal or professional, don't try to change – instead benefit from your differences
- Find out if your child is introverted, shy or both. Care about the difference. Don't call introverted children shy
- If you have an introverted child, especially if you are an extroverted parent, take care to let the child have own-time and teach him or her that it's perfectly okay to not be social all the time