

Society doesn't enable introverts to thrive. Here's why that should change

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"He'll come out of his shell eventually."

"She's just a little shy."

"You just need to learn to speak up a little more."

Welcome to the wonderful world of the "extrovert ideal."

The Western world places a premium on extroverted behaviors such as gregariousness, dominance, being comfortable in the spotlight, preferring action to contemplation, valuing certainty over doubt, and favoring quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong.

But more and more scholarship suggests these personality traits are not necessarily the "best" way to be, and that the unique experiences and perspectives of a quieter category of humans – known as Highly Sensitive People – are of great value to the world at large. Greatist explores the new Highly Sensitive Ideal.

WHAT'S THE DEAL?

Pioneering research about introversion versus extroversion was conducted by Dr. Elaine N. Aron in 1996. It was then that Dr. Aron coined the term "Highly Sensitive Person" (HSP), which describes people who process sensory data more deeply and thoroughly due to a biological difference in their nervous systems. Twenty percent of the population in the U.S. is considered highly sensitive (equal numbers in men and women), and evidence suggests these individuals are born and not made.

How does one qualify as an HSP? For starters, HSPs have great imagination and intellectual abilities; are creative and curious; are hard workers and good problem solvers; are extremely conscious and compassionate; greatly respect nature, art, and music; have profound and intense sensations and feelings; are objective and can see the bigger picture; notice things few people notice; and tend to withdraw and feel emotionally drained at sensory-rich events. While many HSPs may also be introverts, not all introverts are HSPs.

Being an HSP has often been confused with innate shyness, social anxiety problems, inhibition, social phobia and fearfulness, and introversion. In reality, HSPs simply experience the world differently than their classically extroverted peers. That doesn't mean they're averse to social interaction; in fact, one in five HSPs are actually extroverts. But while classic extroverts tend to gain energy from social activities, HSPs may eventually grow exhausted from these interactions and need some solo downtime to recover, just like introverts.

WHY IT MATTERS

Despite HSPs' admirable qualities, society is often structured in ways that can be difficult for HSPs to adjust to. In the classroom, highly sensitive kids are frequently called on when their hand isn't raised, or asked to participate in large group activities and in other highly-stimulating environments that may cause them to shut down. In the business world, open office settings and group brainstorming meetings are the norm. These structures are designed with extroverts in mind, which leaves one fifth of the U.S. population struggling to keep up with standards that don't enable them to thrive.

When given space to flourish, HSPs tend to be intelligent, reflective, independent, and level-headed. They also tend to have better focus than their extroverted peers, especially when preparing projects, and think things through before acting – all of which can make them excellent leaders. In fact, some of our greatest ideas, art, and inventions – from the theory of relativity (Albert Einstein) to the modern evolutionary theory (Charles Darwin) – have come from HSPs.

All of this is to suggest that society both needs the contributions of HSPs and needs to enable them to operate in environments where they can truly unleash their potential. This means, for example, allowing equal time for individual work in school settings, and allowing for solo brainstorming sessions in the office.

As more and more research and theory about the unique benefits of introversion come to light, society would benefit greatly from ditching the "extrovert ideal" and give equal weight to the experiences, ideas, and perspectives of these quiet, compassionate, and sensitive thinkers.

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