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The Upside Of Being An Introvert (And Why Extroverts Are Overrated)

By Bryan Walsh

I'm in the bathroom of the American embassy in Tokyo, and I can't leave. Somewhere in the elegant rooms beyond, the ambassador is holding his annual holiday party. Diplomats from around the world, U.S. military personnel and reporters are mingling, sipping Champagne and picking at hors d'oeuvres. As TIME's Tokyo bureau chief, I should be there, trolling for gossip or mining potential sources.

And for 20 minutes or so after arriving, despite the usual nerves, I did just that. But small talk with stiff-backed strangers at a swanky cocktail party is by far my least favorite part of my job. Send me to a famine or a flood and I'm comfortable. A few rounds of the room at a social event, however, leave me exhausted. So now and then I retreat into the solitude of the bathroom, watching the minutes tick by until I've recovered enough to go back out there.

My name is Bryan, and I'm an introvert. If this scene sounds familiar to you, then chances are that you're one too.

We're not alone, even if it sometimes feels that way. By some estimates, 30% of all people fall on the introvert end of the temperament spectrum--but it takes some explaining to understand just what that label means. For one thing, introverted does not have to mean shy, though there is overlap. Shyness is a form of anxiety characterized by inhibited behavior. It also implies a fear of social judgment that can be crippling. Shy people actively seek to avoid social situations, even ones they might want to take part in, because they may be inhibited by fear. Introverts shun social situations because, Greta Garbo--style, they simply want to be alone.

"Introverted people aren't bothered by social situations," says Louis Schmidt, director of the Child Emotion Laboratory at McMaster University in Ontario. "They just prefer not to engage." While extroverts draw energy from mingling with large groups of people--picture former President and extrovert in chief Bill Clinton joyously working a rope line--introverts find such social interactions taxing.

Simply being an introvert can also feel taxing--especially in America, land of the loud and home of the talkative. From classrooms built around group learning to open-plan offices that encourage endless meetings, it sometimes seems that the quality of your work has less value than the volume of your voice.

And as if the world weren't slanted enough toward the extrovert, study after study has made sociability seem like a prerequisite for good health, right along with low cholesterol and frequent exercise. Very shy and introverted people have been shown to succumb more rapidly to diseases like HIV and to be at greater risk for depression than their extroverted counterparts. In schools, it's the bolder kids who get attention from teachers, while quiet children can too easily languish in the back of the classroom. "Our culture expects people to be outgoing and sociable," says Christopher Lane, an English professor at Northwestern University and the author of *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness*. "It's the unstated norm, and against that norm introverts stand out as seemingly problematic."

But that unstated norm discounts the hidden benefits of the introverted temperament--for workplaces, personal relationships and society as a whole. Introverts may be able to fit all their friends in a phone booth, but those relationships tend to be deep and rewarding. Introverts are more cautious and deliberate than extroverts, but that means they tend to think things through more thoroughly, which means they can often make smarter decisions. Introverts are better at listening--which, after all, is easier to do if you're not talking--and that in turn can make them better business leaders, especially if their employees feel empowered to act on their own initiative. And simply by virtue of their ability to sit still and focus, introverts find it easier to spend long periods in solitary work, which turns out to be the best way to come up with a fresh idea or master a skill.

Introversion and extroversion aren't fixed categories--there's a personality spectrum, and many, known as ambiverts, fall in the gap between the two traits--but they are vital to our personality. "Our tendency to be extroverted or introverted is as profound a part of our identities as our gender," says Susan Cain, author of the new book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. "But there's a subtle bias against introverts, and it's generating a waste of talent and energy and happiness." It may be time for America to learn the forgotten rewards of sitting down and shutting up.

Born This Way

If you want to know how tough a society of extroverts can be for introverts and how quiet types can learn to adapt, you could do worse than talk to Cain. A graduate of Harvard Law School--not an institution known for churning out timid folks--she practiced corporate law for seven years before she began writing full time. During most of those years in the legal system, she hated what she did. Not every day--Cain loved research and writing--but it soon became clear that her soft-spoken, introspective temperament might not have been the best fit for a high-powered law firm. Eventually she left law and began working on her own, coaching clients in negotiating skills and working as a writer. "When I started practicing the law, I thought the ideal lawyer was bold and comfortable in the spotlight, but I was none of those things," says Cain. "I could fake those things, but it wasn't my natural self."

Faking it is exactly what a lot of introverts learn to do from an early age. And that masquerade covers up something primal and deep. Scientists have begun to learn that the introverted or extroverted temperament seems strongly inborn and inherited, influencing our behavior from not long after we're out of the womb.

That was the conclusion of a pioneering series of experiments by Harvard developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan. In a 1989 study, he and his colleagues gathered a sample group of 500 4-month-old infants and exposed them to new experiences in the lab, including popping balloons, colorful mobiles and the smell of alcohol on cotton swabs. About 20% of the infants reacted intensely to the stimuli, crying and pumping their arms. About 40% stayed relatively quiet, and the remaining 40% fell between the two extremes.

Kagan predicted that the infants who had the most noticeable responses--the group he called high-reactive--would likely be introverted as adolescents, whereas low-reactives would likely be extroverted. When he brought his subjects back into the lab as they grew older, his hypothesis proved true: high-reactive infants matured into more inhibited, introverted teenagers. "There's a strong footprint on temperament that you see early in life," says Dr. Carl Schwartz, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston and a former student of Kagan's. "It's not deterministic, but if you're a highly reactive baby, you're less likely to become a bond trader or Bill Clinton."

Psychologist Elaine Aron, author of the 1997 book *The Highly Sensitive Person*, explains what's behind this. People who are introverts by nature, she says, may simply have a lower threshold for stimulation than others. It doesn't take too many popped balloons and crowded rooms before they learn to compensate by keeping a low, quiet profile, conserving their limited energy. The definition of hell for an introvert isn't other people--not exactly. But people are stimuli, and a cocktail party or brainstorming session full of them can blow their neural circuits. So they limit their exposure. Meanwhile, extroverts are a little bit like addicts who are always in search of a high, seeking out stimuli--in the healthier form of social situations--that would make an introvert's head ring.

In studies conducted with functional magnetic resonance imagers, Schwartz found that the amygdalae in the brains of those original high-reactive subjects--now adults--tend to light up when they're shown pictures of unfamiliar faces, while the amygdalae of low-reactive subjects show less activity. That makes sense: the amygdala processes fearful stimuli, among other functions, and the introvert's first reaction to new people or experiences is usually guarded caution. "It's not genes or the environment alone that drive this," says Schwartz. "It's the environment in dialogue with the genes."

Quiet Babies, Fretful Parents

Caution, inhibition and even fearfulness may be healthy--and smart--adaptations for the overstimulated person, but they're still not characteristics many parents would want in their children, especially in a society that lionizes the bold. So it's common for moms and dads of introverted offspring to press their kids

to be more outgoing, lest they end up overlooked in class and later in life. That, however, can be a mistake--and not just because our temperaments are difficult to change fundamentally.

The very fact that introverts are more sensitive to their environment often means they're fully aware that they appear out of step with the expectations of others, and they can easily internalize that criticism. Just about every adult introvert can remember being scolded, even if gently, for being too quiet as a kid. Anytime a teacher grades on classroom participation, introverted kids will be at a disadvantage. There's nothing wrong with parents' nudging their shy children into the world, but there is something wrong if it's more than a nudge. "You don't want to break the kid by overwhelming their coping capacity," says Jay Belsky, a psychologist at the University of California at Davis. "The key is sensitive encouragement."

But introverts also have tremendous advantages. Sure, there are thrills to be found in the situations extroverts crave, but there are dangers too. Extroverts are more likely than introverts to be hospitalized as the result of an injury, for example, and they're more likely to have affairs or change relationships frequently, with all the collateral damage that can entail. And while we all seek rewards, extroverts may be too hungry for them. That can lead them to be ambitious, which is fine, but it may also make them prioritize ambition over avoiding serious risks, which is not. "Extroverts are much more likely to get really excited by the possibility of a reward, but because of that, they won't always pay attention to warning signals," says Cain. "Introverts are much more circumspect."

What happens when people chase rewards--particularly the financial kind--while ignoring the attendant risks of catastrophe and collapse? You get train wrecks like the economic crisis of 2008 and 2009, for which extroverts may deserve a lot of the blame. Camelia Kuhnen of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management found in a study that a variation of a dopamine-regulating gene associated with thrill seeking is a strong predictor of financial risk taking. People with a gene variant linked to introversion, on the other hand, took 28% less financial risk than others. And this applies beyond finance. The overconfidence that characterizes many extroverts can lead to grave political mistakes like the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, in which President John F. Kennedy--a supreme extrovert--failed to foresee the strength of the opposition in Cuba.

Studies also show that introverts tend to be better gamblers because they have so keen an awareness of risk. It's no coincidence that Warren Buffett, the world's greatest investor, is widely considered to be a homebody, happier reading annual reports or playing bridge than going out and socializing.

The introvert advantage isn't only about avoiding trouble--for yourself or the global financial system. Florida State University psychologist K. Anders Ericsson believes that deliberate practice--training conducted in solitude, with no partner or teammate--is key to achieving transcendent skill, whether in a sport, in a vocation or with a musical instrument. In one study, Ericsson and some of his colleagues asked professors at the Music Academy in Berlin to divide violinists into three groups, ranging from those who would likely go on to professional careers to those who would become teachers instead of performers. The researchers asked the violinists to keep diaries and found that all three groups spent about the same

amount of time--more than 50 hours a week--on musical activities. But the two groups whose skill levels made them likelier to play well enough to perform publicly spent most of their time practicing in solitude.

In later studies, Ericsson and his colleagues found similar results with chess grand masters, athletes and even ordinary college students studying for exams. For all these groups, solitary training allows for a level of intense and personal focus that's hard to sustain in a group setting. "You gain the most on your performance when you work alone," says Ericsson. "And the introverted temperament might make some kids more willing to make that commitment."

The trouble is, fewer and fewer of us have time for solitary contemplation and practice anymore. It's not just the assault of e-mail, cell phones and social media; in fact, many introverts prefer these digital tools because they provide a buffer that telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings don't. But the very geography of the American workplace is designed to force people together. Some 70% of American workers spend their days in open-plan offices, with little or no separation from colleagues; since 1970, the average amount of space allotted to each employee has shrunk from 500 sq. ft. (46 sq m) to 200 sq. ft. (19 sq m). Much of this is done in the name of collaboration, but enforced teamwork can stifle creativity. "You need to give people time to think if you want them to actually get work done," says Cain.

It's not just introverts who suffer when work becomes an endless series of meetings and brainstorming sessions. Anyone who has spent time in any organization knows that there is rarely a correlation between the quality of an idea and the volume at which it is presented. Defying the loudest speaker--and the groupthink that tends to build around that person--can be painful for anyone. Gregory Berns, a neuroeconomist at Emory University, has found that when people oppose group consensus, their amygdalae light up, signaling fear of rejection. The risks of groupthink are perhaps most apparent in criminal juries, where the desire for social cohesion can sometimes short-circuit justice.

The right kind of leader can break that pattern, and the right kind of leader may be an introverted one. Introverted CEOs are more common than you might think, given the caricature of the hard-charging, fast-talking executive. By one estimate, 40% of high-powered American businesspeople fall on the introvert end of the spectrum, a group that appears to include the likes of Bill Gates, Charles Schwab and Google CEO Larry Page. The ability to assess risk and remain focused on the long term can pay off big in the boardroom. So can the capacity for listening, a trait that can be too easily lost in the isolation of the C-level suite. "Introverted leaders tend to be more detail oriented and better able to hear their employees," says Jennifer Kahnweiler, an executive coach and author of *The Introverted Leader*.

There's even a case to be made that introverted CEOs are the business leaders of the future. Wharton Business School psychologist Adam Grant has found that introverted leaders mesh best with empowered and independent employees, while traditionally extroverted executives work best with employees who take orders easily. "In a faster-paced service-and-knowledge economy, it's much more difficult for leaders to anticipate all of the threats and opportunities that face their organizations," says Grant. "This need for

employee proactivity has created a distinct advantage for introverted leaders." And that, in turn, may spell an advantage for their companies.

In fact, Americans may all be living under an introverted leader right now. Barack Obama isn't shy--no shy person survives a presidential campaign--but he shows tendencies toward introversion, including the love of solitude that helped him thrive as a writer. As a leader, Obama is more facilitator than dominator, and before he was a politician he was an academic--a line of work that probably has more introverts per capita than any other profession except long-haul truckers. As Obama told TIME's Fareed Zakaria recently, he simply prefers to spend his limited free time with his family rather than at Washington parties. "The stereotype that politicians are extroverts has a basis in fact," says Aubrey Immanuel, a psychologist who runs the Unit for the Study of Personality in Politics at St. John's University in Minnesota. "But Obama is relatively modest on that scale."

That sets him apart from many of his predecessors, like the gregarious George W. Bush, whose bonhomie was one of his great selling points--to say nothing of Clinton, who had to be physically torn away from crowds. But if extroversion is great on the campaign trail, it doesn't always help in the business of governing. Both Clinton and Bush endangered their presidencies by engaging in what turned out to be graver risks than they might have imagined: one with an intern, the other in Iraq. An introvert like Obama is more inclined to think before he acts, and if anything, the President has been criticized as too risk averse.

Yet Obama's temperament may hold him back in other ways too. He is known to keep a tight circle of advisers, which is a terrible way to become exposed to new ideas or fresh perspectives. The vaunted listening skills of the introvert are pointless, after all, if there's nothing new to hear. The President's rare attempts at schmoozing, like his "golf summit" with House Speaker John Boehner last summer, can seem forced and false. While the who-would-you-want-to-have-a-beer-with test may be an overworked criterion when it comes to choosing among presidential candidates, it does help when that candidate reaches the Oval Office and has to strike bargains with an often obstreperous opposition.

But just because all of us--our Presidents included--have powerful inborn traits doesn't mean we can't stretch the limits of our personalities when the stakes are high enough. Take Brian Little. He's a research psychologist and superstar academic lecturer; his class on personality at Harvard was perennially one of the most popular at the university. He's also a serious introvert, one who needs to take solitary breaks after intense social activity, even--yes--hiding in the bathroom from time to time. "The feeling of stress is always there," says Little.

Yet he pushes through the constraints of his temperament because the social value of lecturing and speaking--of truly connecting with his students--trumps the discomfort his introversion can cause him. Little calls this phenomenon Free Trait Theory: the idea that while we have certain fixed bits of personality, we can act out of character in the service of core personal goals. The key, he explains, is balancing three equal but very different identities. There's our mostly inborn personality, the one that wants us to be introverted or extroverted; that's the biogenic identity. There are the expectations of our culture, family and

religion--the sociogenic identity. And then there are our personal desires and our sense of what matters--the ideogenic identity.

An introvert like Little could live in a way that satisfies his nerves, never leaving the library, but then his ideogenic self would starve. He'd miss out on doing what matters most to him, even if doing it occasionally sends him into a cold sweat. "Am I just going to let things wash over me, or am I going to strike out and change and grow and challenge?" says Little. "The answer depends on what you want out of life."

So it can be for all of us introverts. From the moment we wake up to the second we go to sleep--preferably after relaxing with a book in bed--introverts live in an extrovert's world, and there are days when we'd prefer to do nothing more than stay at home. But while our temperaments may define us, that doesn't mean we're controlled by them--if we can find something or someone that motivates us to push beyond the boundaries of our nerves. I'm happy to be an introvert, but that's not all I am.

TO READ AN ESSAY BY SUSAN CAIN, THE AUTHOR OF QUIET, GO TO TIME.COM/SUSAN-CAIN

Quiz excerpted from *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, by Susan Cain. <http://bit.ly/v0g4SP>. Published by Crown Publishers

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