

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME XV, NUMBER 6



“YOUR SACRED SPACE IS WHERE
YOU CAN FIND YOURSELF
AGAIN AND AGAIN.”

– Joseph Campbell

We live in a world of extroverts. Our social norms are geared to people who are “out there” – those who achieve, compete, socialize easily, and are energized by the external world. Society encourages us to describe ourselves in terms of what we see externally (like TV ads) and we try to match the models provided for us. Our idea of success is to achieve a life that’s prescribed for us by the social sphere. The extrovert’s idea of happiness is to have lots of friends and to enjoy talking, even when they don’t put much thought into what they say. They like activity and being around excitement. When so much of our attention is directed outwardly, however, we can lose track of our own authentic needs.

The introvert is the inward-looking person. Introverts prefer a life of contemplation, being alone or with a close friend rather than in a group, and often favor listening rather than talking (unless they feel comfortable with the topic). They feel ill at ease and even overstimulated when things get too exciting. They appear calm on the outside, but may feel anxious internally around other people. Even if they enjoy an activity, they need time for rest and regrouping after a while. Introverts don’t like feeling pressured – and they prefer to live according to their own needs rather than the demands of others. When things get to be too stimulating, they might “zone out.”



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Unfortunately, in a world dominated by extroverts (estimates show that three-quarters of people fall on the extrovert end of the continuum, while a quarter are introverts), the inward-directed person is described as having a problem. Others see them as aloof, unfriendly, and mysterious. Because they prefer not to engage in typical social aspirations (like aiming for the fast track on the job or attending as many social events as possible), they may be called losers – wallflowers, lacking in gumption, loners, self-centered. To make things worse for introverts, they often believe the labels cast upon them and feel there is something wrong with them. Like all of us, the introvert defines the good life as having lots of friends, parties to go to, success on the job, and the ability to meet challenges with energy and enthusiasm. When they compare themselves to these social ideals, they feel that they fall short.

Introverts, because they feel pressured to measure up to ideals that don't necessarily apply to them, may experience anxiety, anger, or depression. Self-image issues are often a main concern for the introvert. They may even feel guilt and shame for failing to live up to the standards of the extrovert world. Introverts may find themselves thinking about the degree to which others can be trusted.

In the early days of psychology, Sigmund Freud felt that the healthy person was the one who could meet the demands of the outer world (that is, that the extrovert was the healthy one). Carl Jung, on the other hand, felt that people fell on a natural continuum between introversion and extroversion and that psychological health was defined by one's ability to move between these two states as the situation demanded. He felt that we all have our natural niches and that any place on the continuum is healthy – and, as it turned out, Jung was right. Recent studies on the brain indicate that it is natural for some people to be attracted to excitement and for others to prefer familiarity with their own inner processes. These imaging studies have shown that the neural pathways in the brains of introverts and extroverts are different, as are their neurotransmitters (the brains of extroverts are activated by dopamine, while the brains of introverts are activated by acetylcholine). Introversion is a natural state and it has many advantages.

The Advantages of Being an Introvert

Although the introvert may lack qualities valued by many in our society, it helps to understand that the introverted lifestyle is a powerful one. There are positive and negative features associated with both

introversion and extroversion. In truth, neither is superior to the other. Our goal might be to identify which describes us better – introvert or extrovert – and to recognize how our particular orientation can serve us best. Let's consider some of the strengths of the introvert.

Expending Energy

The attention of extroverts is generally outside of themselves. They feel energized by spending time with other people and engaging in activities with an external focus. They freely spend energy and may have a hard time slowing down. After a day's work, they might wonder what to do next. Unfortunately, extroverts may feel lonely or bored if they have to spend time alone with nothing much to do.

Introverts, on the other hand, are energized more by their internal world – ideas, emotions, impressions, thought patterns. Their focus is on the inside. If they have to spend time alone, so much the better. It gives them the space they need to reflect, work through their thoughts and feelings, and, in this way, recharge themselves. When they need to expend energy in the outside world, and they deplete it quickly, their best strategy is to plan ways to meet their social obligations, but at the same time to protect and conserve their energy so they don't feel drained. For example, the introvert might leave a party early so that she can regroup and have the energy for other obligations.

Dealing with Stimulation

Extroverts love external stimulation. The louder the music, the more people at a party, the greater the demands to perform at work, the more they thrive. When things get quiet, however, like a slow day at work, the antsy feeling sets in. They need to chat with a colleague, go out for a break – anything to keep their stimulation level higher.

Introverts become overstimulated easily. Street fairs can bring on that glazed look and the feeling that they have to find a place to sit and just observe for a while. And during their rest period, they focus on quieting their minds, breathing deeply, and searching for some peace. Their goal, and this is a strength of the introvert, is to find their internal balance and not to lose themselves in the excitement of the crowd.

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Breadth versus Depth

Extroverts are experiential – their lives focus on gathering experiences. They expose themselves to ideas, people, and activities. What extroverts often lack, however, is processing these many experiences so they can understand meaningful patterns in their lives. They flit from one interest to the next and may find it difficult to understand what it all means.

Introverts strive for depth within a more limited number of experiences. They want to understand the patterns in their lives. They look for richness in their experiences. They take in information from the outside world, reflect, and then expand upon it. They like to concentrate on a thought – and they do not like being interrupted. In fact, interruptions mean that they have to expend energy to regain their concentration.

Self-Reflection

One of the many strengths of the inward-directed person is the ability, and even the need, to look within. One measure of a life lived well is self-knowledge – and not necessarily the number of unexamined experiences the person has had. When a person can look inside and understand in a meaningful way the events and patterns he or she has witnessed, and put it all together into a coherent pattern, then one of this person's life goals has been achieved. They have moved to the stage of experiencing the examined life.

Eckhart Tolle, in *A New Earth*, provides a good model for self-reflection that can lead to an understanding of our life patterns. He asserts that we usually live our lives unconsciously, trapped within the various experiences – and our reactions to them – that we have been through in our lives. Our lives involve a working through of the pain we have experienced – and that becomes the filter through which we act and understand the world.

For example, if we were neglected by our family in our childhood, it is possible that in adulthood we may live with the fear of losing others through abandonment or rejection. He suggests that our ego (that is, our reality orientation) becomes invested in dealing with our early neglect. So now, in adulthood, we put a lot of energy into dealing with rejection and loss. We protect ourselves from it. And we may even seek out friends or a mate who might reject us – and this provides us, in adulthood, with a way to work through our early issues of neglect. This issue becomes so pervasive in our lives that it colors how we interpret our life events, and the lives of others. And we don't give a second thought to other interpretations.

Tolle suggests ways to gain insight into our life patterns, such as the one described above, by following a few self-reflective steps. Introverts will be naturally drawn to this approach, but extroverts can do it too!

First, **feel the pain** that comes up whenever an experience of rejection or neglect arises. Describe the pain to yourself. Where is it located? How is it expressed? What does it make you do? The goal here is to increase your awareness of your own pain (which normally is something you've adapted to, although it may appear again and again).

Now, **get in touch with the observing part of yourself.** Think of your observing self as a third person looking down at yourself and describing what you go through. As you observe yourself feeling the pain, you might say something like, "I am now obsessing about how cruel this feels to me," or "I seem to be attracted to people who never give me enough attention." Don't place any value judgments on your thoughts – just observe them.

And now, **understand your observing self.** What is the observing self thinking? Notice that you, as the observer, don't feel the pain. You are now just a neutral, objective witness. And you now have a new level of insight – that is, you can now understand what you have thought and felt for so many years in a new light.

This is one way to experience self-reflection. It's a skill that comes more easily to the introvert than to the extrovert, but both can benefit from looking within and creating a meaningful life.



RECOMMENDED READING

Marti Olsen Laney,
The Introvert Advantage.
2002, 330 pages,
paperback, \$14.95.
ISBN: 0-7611-2369-5

Eckhart Tolle,
A New Earth.
2006, 316 pages,
paperback, \$14.00.
ISBN: 978-0-452-28996-3

THE BACK PAGE

Are You an Introvert or an Extrovert?



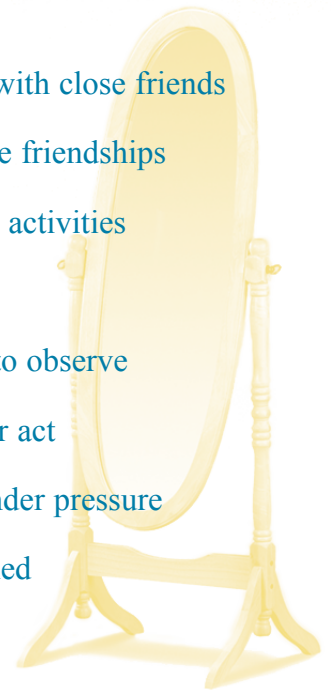
Place a check mark by those items below that best describe you. The first column describes the extrovert and the second column describes the introvert. The preponderance of your check marks will suggest which category you fall into – or you might fall in the middle of the extrovert / introvert continuum.

The Extrovert

- I like to be in the midst of things
- I prefer variety and am bored with sameness
- I know lots of people who are my friends
- I enjoy casual talk, even with strangers
- I love activity and am eager for more
- I don't need to think first before speaking
- I am generally quite energetic
- I tend to talk more than listen

The Introvert

- I like to relax alone or with close friends
- I prefer only a few close friendships
- I need rest after outside activities
- I listen more than talk
- I appear calm and like to observe
- I think before I speak or act
- My mind goes blank under pressure
- I don't like feeling rushed



This quiz is derived from Marti Olsen Laney's *The Introvert Advantage*.



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