EDITORIAL

Understanding the Introvert Preference

Editor’s Note: This month’s editorial is a departure from our standard format. We have chosen to share with our readers an excerpt from a graduate student’s clinical journal that focuses on how one’s style or “preference” for introversion can influence the learning experience, as well as the academic culture’s response to it. Introversion is a “preference for drawing energy from one’s internal world of ideas, emotions, and impressions,” compared with extroversion, which is a “preference for drawing energy from the outside world of people, activities, and things” (Hirsh & Kummerow, 1998, p. 1).

In this excerpt, the student shares with her instructor the insights she gleaned from a recent book she read as they apply to her own preference for introversion. We believe her insights serve as compelling object lessons for nurse educators who themselves have a natural preference for introversion or, perhaps more important, who are working with students with this preference. The goal is not to change one’s preference but to understand it and use its strengths. The Editors wish to thank the student, Heidi Eve-Cahoon, BSN, RN, and her graduate instructor, Greer Glazer, PhD, RN, FAAN, both of Kent State University in Ohio, for their willingness to share this illuminating journal entry with our readers.

~ Janis P. Bellack, PhD, RN, FAAN

I have been reading a book called The Introvert Advantage by Laney (2002). I read about it in the Sunday paper and went right out and bought the book. I could definitely identify with it, and I thought of using it as a clinical review so that I could share what I was learning with you.

The book is composed of three parts—“A Fish Out of Water,” describing the characteristics and physiology of introverts; “Navigating the Extroverted Waters,” describing various relationships; and “Creating the ‘Just Right’ Life,” describing how to use the introvert characteristics to be most effective in functioning within society. I am going to relate to you the information that I gleaned from Part One.

We live in a society that values extroversion. Introversion has been described negatively in everything from dictionaries to psychological theory. Freud did not like introverts and thought introversion was pathological. He thought the goal of psychological development was to find gratification in the world of external reality. However, Adler looked at it differently. His theory was directed inward toward one’s own thoughts and feelings. He saw people as creative artists forming their own lives. Jung thought Freud was an extrovert and Adler an introvert, and that they were both on to something. Jung developed his theory that humans are born with an endowed temperament that places us somewhere on an introvert-extrovert continuum. We are oriented toward one end or the other. All are healthy, and individuals can learn to move on the continuum, but it takes a lot of energy and is not necessarily beneficial.

There are three main differences between introversion and extroversion. Energy creation is the most important difference, but the response to stimulation and the approach to knowledge are also different. Introverts are energized by the internal world of ideas, impressions, and emotion. When they may appear withdrawn, they are focusing inside their heads. They are reflective, and this takes time. Extroverts focus outside of themselves and are energized by activities, people, and things of the out-

May 2003, Vol. 42, No. 5
side world. They spend energy freely and move at a fast pace. Introverts take more time creating energy, and it moves out faster. (It is hard for us introverts to keep up with extroverts, and this can leave us exhausted.)

How the two respond to stimulation is another difference. "Extroverts like to experience a lot, and introverts like to know a lot about what they experience" (Laney, 2002, p. 22). Introverts are easily overstimulated by anything coming from the outside. Too much noise, too much activity, too many people, or too many projects can overwhelm an introvert. When overstimulated, the introvert needs to take a quiet break, or the mind shuts down to limit input. The author describes this as a "mind/vapor lock" (Laney, 2002, p. 23). I have described it as feeling in a fog, or like I am dissociating. I was glad to read that this is a common experience for introverts. I thought I had a mental health problem.

The third way that introverts are different is that they prefer depth to breadth. Extroverts like breadth—enjoying many friends, many experiences, knowing a little about a lot. Introverts prefer depth. They have fewer friends, but with more intimacy, and they like to know a lot about a particular topic, allowing themselves to mull over a subject. Introverts dislike interruption, as it breaks their deep concentration. Introverts are great observers.

Introversion is not shyness. Shyness is extreme self-consciousness around people and usually is learned from a humiliating experience. It is a lack of confidence. As the author states it, "Shyness is not who you are, it is what you think other people think you are" (Laney, 2002, p. 43). Introversion is the ability to tune in to your inner world and is constructive and creative. Introverts like people and have social skills, but they prefer one-on-one conversations to group activities. Introverts are not unsocial. They just like their relationships and conversation to be deep. For example, in clinical the other day, I met the hospital chaplain, a very nice woman about my age. Somehow we began to talk about the President’s State of the Union address. We went on to discuss our pacifist beliefs, our vision as women, our religious and spiritual orientation, and our dislike of SUVs [sport utility vehicles]. It was the high point of my day, and I felt charged. I felt like I had met a kindred spirit.

Introverts often are thought to be self-centered. This is actually not the case. Introverts focus and reflect on what they are feeling and experiencing. This helps them understand the world and be empathetic.

The neurotransmitters that dominate brain pathways to process thought are different in extroverts and introverts. In introverts, the long acetylcholine pathway dominates. This means that introverts may start talking in the middle of a thought. Introverts have a good memory but take a long time to retrieve information and may forget things they know well. They are clearer about ideas and feelings after sleeping on them. They may not be aware of their thoughts unless they write or talk about them. What I found particularly interesting was that introverts have trouble retrieving words or names when they are speaking out loud, especially if anxious. However, written words use a different pathway in the brain, and words often seem to flow effortlessly in that form of expression. Surprised? Extroverts use a short dopamine pathway. They are able to talk quickly and talk more than listen. They have good short-term memory and are quick thinking. They do well on timed tests and under pressure, unlike introverts—I can attest to this. Extroverts can make chitchat and feel energized by discussion, novelty, and experiences.

Introverts primarily function under the parasympathetic nervous system, which means they may react slowly. They have a calm or reserved manner and may need frequent breaks to restore energy. Extroverts function primarily under the sympathetic nervous system. They move quickly under stress and enjoy moving even when they don’t have to, such as in exercise and sports. They have high energy levels and do not need to eat as often. They like to keep busy and become uncomfortable when they have nothing to do. Here is an interesting tidbit—extroverts tend to slow down or burn out in midlife.

Introverts are not all the same. Not in degree of introversion or in their brains. Just like extroverts, some are right brained and some are left brained. I am definitely right brained. Right-brained introverts respond to events with emotion, they are playful in solving problems, have a good sense of humor (although my husband may argue that one), process information subjectively, improve, use metaphor or analogies when describing something, use their hands in conversation, think in pictures and patterns, see solutions as evolving, interpret body language easily, and are able to deal with several problems at once (but we can’t leap over tall buildings in a single bound). The left-brained introverts analyze pros and cons before taking action, are neat and tidy, base decisions on facts, give concrete examples when describing something, think in terms of right/wrong or good/bad, process experiences objectively, are very aware of time, like to categorize, are idea-oriented, comfortable with words or numbers, seek exact solutions, and do not pick up social cues easily.

About 25% of people are introverts, and we bug the other 75%. One reason is that extroverts talk to think and introverts think to talk. Extroverts sometimes think that introverts are hiding something or lacking in confidence. Introverts just need to pull it all over and take time to form their ideas. When it all comes together, they will talk your ear off! Because introverts may not speak up right away and they dislike interrupting, extroverts sometimes assume the introvert has nothing to contribute. This is what I refer to as being “talked over.” I had this problem in Theoretical Basis of Nursing. I am glad we were given the opportunity to write a response at the end of the class, or I would have gone home all bottled up. Introverts often sport a blank affect and appear not to be listening. They are just thinking about it all, unless they are zoned out from overstimulation or bored from superficial chatter. Also, introverts may try to slow things down, and that can be annoying to extroverts.
I believe the world needs us all. We all have something to bring to the big picture. We complement each other. I enjoyed reading this book because I could recognize myself and realize that I am not abnormal or mentally impaired. I am just different but not alone. Actually, I always enjoyed being an introvert. As a child, I loved to just sit and think. It unnerved my parents. I wrote stories and poetry and talked to myself and to God a lot. I still do, especially in the car and the grocery store. It was easier in the grocery store with a baby in the cart. People would stop me and tell me what a wonderful thing it was that I was talking to my infant so much. Yet, I worried that there was something wrong with me, especially when I would forget names, lose words, forget whole topics that I had just researched, or zone out and step into a fog. Now I know I am OK and I am aware of how my mind works, so I can take measures to prevent brain lock.

I wanted to share this with you because you seemed so perplexed with me. I did not take offense, but I did wonder if my personality was getting in my way. So, in typical introvert style, I thought it over and over, and then I got the book and I thought it over some more. I am happy with who I am, and I want to thank you for stimulating me to learn more about myself.

REFERENCES

Heidi Eve-Cahoon, BSN, RN
Kent State University
Kent, Ohio