

The diary of an introvert...

facing my
'fatal flaw'
head-on



New research says pushing introverts to be more outgoing can damage their mental health – **Ceryn Evans** (an introvert) went undercover as an extrovert for a week to investigate >

I am an introvert. I avoid public speaking at all costs, I hate being the centre of attention and I find social events mentally and emotionally exhausting.

I have been introverted from birth – it’s part of my identity – and, although it can make things harder for me at times, I am proud to identify with it. I try to push myself beyond my comfort zone as much as I can but I still miss out on a lot of experiences and, since becoming an adult I’ve noticed how it can hold me back.

More research into personality types and the silent powers of introversion has surfaced in recent years, helping to promote a wider appreciation and acceptance of introverts within society.

Despite this growing acceptance of us quieter types, new research at Tufts University, Massachusetts claims, “Introverts are implicitly encouraged from a young age to try to put their introverted tendencies aside and be more extroverted. Pushing oneself to be more outgoing and social than is natural can be mentally and physically exhausting.”

Society and the workplace are unwittingly geared toward extroverts. With open-plan workspaces and networking events at the centre of most jobs, it’s easy for introverts to feel disadvantaged.

“In a culture where being social and outgoing are prized above all else, it can be difficult, even shameful, to be an introvert,” says Susan Cain in her 2012 TED Talk, ‘The Power of Introverts’. Growing up I believed being introverted was my ‘fatal flaw’ – I’d always leave the school disco early, making and keeping friends as I got older was difficult, and I struggled to get my first job after discovering the horror of group interviews.

As a trainee journalist, I am going to be pitching, interviewing, and collaborating throughout my career – all of which require me to stand out and be comfortable working in a team. I often worry I’m not outgoing enough to achieve a successful career in the media.

So, I decided to put myself through a crash course of extroversion – one torturous week (five days) of extroverted activities to see if I can force myself into being more extroverted and if my general happiness is affected as a result.

What distinguishes introverts and extroverts is how they feel energised. An introvert is energised by being alone whereas extroverts are often described as unable to or avoidant of being alone so are energised when they are around other people.

For the purpose of this experiment, I took the widely-cited Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test. I took it three times to be sure and according to the results I am an 88% introverted ‘Logician’. The running theme for Logicians is our desire for solitude and deep thinking, two things that are better suited to lower-stimulation environments but are also key to work and problem-solving.

“Growing up I believed being introverted was my ‘fatal flaw’”

Monday: seminar

Today I woke up nervous. The start of a new week is always a struggle for me. After enjoying the solitude of the weekend, Monday comes around and I am forced to come out of hibernation and re-join society again. But, today I am extra nervous because I’m kicking off my week of extroversion with a film seminar at an independent theatre. I always shy away from group discussions and am reluctant to draw attention to myself in groups.

The evening was off to a good start – watching a film in silence in the dark is something I can get on board with – but, the film ended and the post-film discussion began. It was uncomfortable at first and finding the right time to include myself was tricky but I enjoyed and didn’t find it particularly draining – win! I sat next to a girl who is studying film at university, “I come here because I love talking about film,” she tells me. “Coming alone doesn’t bother me because by the end of the night I always leave with a new friend, it’s exciting.”

Tuesday: boxercise

Physical contact with strangers is not something I enjoy. For me, meeting new people and surviving small talk is enough to drain my energy for the rest of the day so meeting new people and having to punch, kick and grab them – terrifying and exhausting! Thankfully the group was quite small so I felt less overwhelmed than I anticipated and I felt great once I got over all the touching and eye contact. I’ll be back, maybe.

Wednesday: dinner party

Today I’m going out for dinner with a big group of my friend’s friends – people I do not know. I don’t want to endorse alcohol as a reliever in uncomfortable situations but one or two glasses of wine definitely helped I must admit.

My friend knew I was trying on extroversion for the week so she made sure I was pushed to my limit. We all went around the table introducing ourselves – ice-breakers are up there with my biggest social fears – to force me to endure the attention of eight or nine strangers looking and listening while I talk about myself. It was hell! But, it was nice to be welcomed by the group and feel accepted. “Social relationships are inherently rewarding for us. We have a need to belong and to connect with each other,” says Dr Sonja Lyubomirsky, the lead researcher of a study at the University of California that asked 123 people to act like extroverts for a week. Overall it was a lovely evening and as painful as it was at the start of the night, by the end conversation was flowing and I felt comfortable.

Thursday: zumba

Today’s challenge is what I’ve been dreading the most – Zumba – my worst nightmare and the ultimate test of my performance anxiety and crippling fear of dancing.

An energetic Spanish woman named Raquel stands in front of the class, “Is this anyone’s first time?” she asks with a smile, looking directly at me. Normally this would be the point where I look away or even run away but for the purpose of this challenge I took a deep breath and half raised my hand, feeling the blood rush to my cheeks as 29 experienced ‘zumbians’ looked me up and down.

The class only lasted 30 minutes but it felt like the longest 30 minutes of my life. Dancing in front of people is probably my biggest introverted fear so this really pushed me as far as I can go and honestly, I hated every second of it. But, I can see why people love it, it can be extremely energising and empowering. I spoke to a few of the ladies and they all agreed Zumba makes them feel sexy and confident on top of improving their general fitness – wish I could relate! I left feeling like I wanted to curl up into a ball and hide. Zumba: introvert tested, introvert NOT approved.

Friday: karaoke

The ultimate test of extroversion: standing in a loud, bustling room filled with tipsy extroverts waiting for their turn to butcher Bon Jovi’s ‘Living on Prayer’. As Cain explains, “Extroverts really crave large amounts of stimulation, whereas introverts feel at their most alive and their most switched-on and their most capable when they’re in quieter, more low-key environments.” It’s finally the end of the week and by this point, I am desperate for a night-in bingeing a Netflix series in the safety and solitude of my bedroom. I asked the girl who sang before me – Emily, a mortgage adviser celebrating the end of a long week – how she has the guts to get up on stage, “It’s a laugh and not a big deal. I was a bit nervous but everyone’s drinking and no one’s judging really. Just go for it!” So, I went for it and it wasn’t that bad.

I picked an easy crowd-pleaser hoping the crowd would drown me out, which they did, and I actually enjoyed myself. Same again next weekend?

The verdict

So, what have I learned from life on the ‘other side’? People aren’t as scary as you think and, if you commit, small talk can be survived and even enjoyed! I woke up on Monday a stubborn introvert, adamant that the next five days were going to kill me but I survived, even though I felt more drained than usual by the end of each day.

Aimee Daramus, a Chicago based psychotherapist, told Mic.com, “Since introversion and extroversion are influenced by genetics, they can be very resistant to change, so you probably can’t just decide to become an extrovert.” She adds, “In general, extroverts seem to be happier, but there are ‘happy introverts’, too, so you could definitely work toward becoming a happier introvert.” The week did put a strain on my overall well-being and mental health, particularly when I felt self-conscious or when my bed was calling but allowing myself to experience activities I wouldn’t normally go near did make me feel like a happier, more active participant in society.

But, I agree with Cain, “Introverts bring extraordinary talents and abilities to the world, and should be encouraged and celebrated.” I am *still* an introvert. But, maybe I’ll avoid a lot less from now on.

“You could definitely work toward becoming a happier introvert”

My social battery

