



Introvert! Who Are You Callin' an Introvert? (And just what is an introvert, anyway?)

High School can be extravert heaven. For one reason, extraverts get their energy from interaction with people and the external world—and there's plenty of opportunity for that in High School. For extraverts, High School years are energizing: mad dash hallway conversations between classes; excited crowds at football games; a packed dance floor in the school gym; scores of extracurricular events. Extraverts are likely to move with ease and confidence through their classes, mix easily on campus, and sparkle in extracurricular activities. But not everyone is or was so comfortable in High School—me, for example.

Don't misunderstand, AHS was a *great* school for many reasons, some of which I listed in my last article. But while AHS more than met my academic hopes and desires, I was continually and hopelessly anxious and generally incompetent about most of the rest of my high school experiences. I wanted to belong, to go to football games and to dances. Yet I was almost always uncomfortable (to say the least) with such things. And I dreaded some!

It wasn't until many years later when as an adult and trained to be a facilitator and mediator I learned I was an introvert. I had never even heard the word as a high school student. I didn't understand, for example, introverts get their energy by going within themselves and that too much interaction with the outside drains them so they need to retreat from the world to renew themselves.

Most Americans (75%) are extraverts and, especially in High School, they can see those who aren't as “withdrawn,” “aloof,”

“loners” or, to use High School parlance, “snobs,” “stuck-up” or just plain “weird.” These pejorative terms suggest how little we understand introverts. Introverts want to have friends and to be accepted like everyone else so they often deny their true natures by pretending to be extraverts. This pretense may seem amusing at times but it is mostly painful to those trying hard to fit in.

Some of the best AHS teachers could engage my mind and attention sufficiently so I momentarily “forgot myself” and joined in class discussions. One reason I got straight As in my science classes was because of the principles of experimentation, observation, collecting and analyzing data, and then objectively reporting findings. These kinds of activities engaged my mind and didn't require the confidence, skill and courage it took to ask a girl to the prom!

Well, to tell the truth, I did actually go to one prom. The boyfriend of a girl in my neighborhood couldn't take her to the dance so she asked me to escort her. When we arrived at the gym, she immediately began mixing and enjoying the crowd. The highlight of the evening for me was when I finally got home to the quiet of my room.

Introverts are “wired” differently than extraverts and they have different needs. Like other introverts, I eventually learned how to cope and even thrive in America's extraverted world. And there are, in fact, some real advantages to being an introvert. (See *The Introvert Advantage* by Marti Olsen Laney, Psy.D., herself an introvert.)

So I seek time alone in order to be sufficiently “recharged” for family and social gathering. I value my quiet times of contemplation and no longer feel guilty about needing solitude. And the pain High School embarrassments have healed (?).

The chances are one in four some your of friends and family are introverts. Realize that there is nothing unnatural or wrong with being an introvert. Respect their introversion and don't try to remake them into extraverts. Encourage them to be authentic. Respect their need for time alone and their preference for small gatherings. Learn to be comfortable with their silences.