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An Introvert in an extrovert-friendly world

By Jen Weigel

You're on the bus and the stranger next to you wants to chat. Do you engage in conversation or bury yourself in your book? Or perhaps you sit in a meeting at work and don't say a word while your co-workers dominate the conversation.

If you prefer to keep to yourself on most occasions, chances are you are an introvert. And experts say there are distinct differences in how the brain of the introvert processes information.

"Introverts make up (25 percent to) 30 percent of the U.S. population," said Marti Olsen Laney, author of "The Introvert Advantage" and "The Hidden Gifts of the Introverted Child." "There seems to be a negative connotation associated with being an introvert. They keep to themselves. They want to be alone.

"But some of the most successful people — scientists, historians, professors — are introverts."

Laney studied the physiological differences between introverts and extroverts, and said introverts have the ability to house a lot of data, causing them to go inward or step away to absorb the information — a tactic many extroverts find offensive.

"The extrovert doesn't know that if an introvert isn't talking, they are still thinking," Laney said.

Sherrie Haynie, consultant for CPP Inc., the exclusive publisher of the Myers-Briggs personality assessment, said an extrovert in the business world is thought to have more power, but you can't ignore the benefits of the introvert.

"Both are seen as having equal talents," Haynie said. "But unlike an extrovert, who will fire off ideas as they come to mind, an introvert will take in information thoughtfully — and they are mentally capable of holding off from responding immediately. This can be an advantage in personal relationships, with children or colleagues at work. It's a real advantage in conflict situations or miscommunications."

Laney agreed that an introvert's ability to think before speaking can be highly undervalued.

"We are under this belief that faster is better and faster is smarter, and I think we over-value that," Laney said.

Here are some tips to being an introvert in an extrovert-friendly world:

Educate those around you.

"We see this frequently in a business setting," Haynie said. "The introvert may appear (as if)

they are not involved or included in the conversation. But what they are doing is taking in the information and putting it in the right bucket. Tell your colleagues, 'I process and communicate best if I have an opportunity to take in the information and then come back with an educated response.' "

Plan ahead.

"If you know the agenda beforehand, it will help you not get caught off guard," Haynie said. "Introverts will have a better time if they are well prepared for several situations. By formulating possible responses in advance, you make it more comfortable for yourself."

Take alone time.

"You have to understand physiologically that everything (introverts) do drains energy," Laney said. "They have to refuel. So if this means taking a walk, or bowing out early, be sure to do this."

Know the warning signs.

"Research shows an introvert responds to stress by being quiet and reserved," Haynie said. "And then when it gets to the point where they are over the edge, they will actually revert to an external explosive reaction where they might speak out and be externally emotionally upset, which is totally out of character, but a response to severe stress."