

I Love You, Now Leave Me Alone: What Friendship Means to an Introvert

It can be hard to reconcile the need for close connections with the urge to cancel plans. Experts say it's a matter of taking control and finding your comfort zone.



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March 13, 2023

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Few things in life satisfy me as much as canceling social plans.

As a reporter who regularly covers friendship, I am well-versed in the benefits of platonic connection. I know, for instance, that studies show that people with strong social ties live longer and are better protected against stress. And I am familiar with the evidence showing that a truly robust social circle encompasses different types of friendship, including work pals (who can help you feel more engaged and productive throughout the day) and “weak ties” (casual acquaintances who can help you learn new things and improve your daily sense of well being).

But I am who I am: an introvert who delights in alone time. I admit I seldom feel motivated to make new friends, or even to see the small-but-cherished group I already have. For me, the tension between craving camaraderie, connection and all of the wonderful benefits of friendship, and wanting to be left alone is real. And the advice that's so often given about making friends in adulthood (including that in my own articles) tends to make me shudder: Put yourself out there? No, thank you.

“Every single person has the fundamental need for connection,” said Kasley Killam, a social scientist and the founder and executive director of Social Health Labs, a nonprofit that works to create solutions for isolation and loneliness. “It's not like introverts don't need meaningful relationships. But what varies is how much and what kind of connection.”

I asked experts who study introversion — all of whom identify as introverts themselves — about what we want and need from our platonic bonds, and how we can make new friends without contorting our personalities or exhausting ourselves from the effort.

What is introversion, and how does it shape friendship?

Experts don't necessarily agree on a set definition of introversion. Laurie Helgoe, an associate clinical professor at Augsburg University in Minneapolis and the author of “Introvert Power: Why Your Inner Life Is Your Hidden Strength,” described it to me as an inward or internal orientation.

“I am thinking of a person's control center or laboratory — the place where they work things through,” Dr. Helgoe said. “For example, if you ask me how my day is going, I'm going to pause and go to my inner laboratory, scan my day and then formulate my response. My husband, the extrovert, is going to say what first comes into his head in order to keep the conversation going, because his laboratory is outside, in the interaction.” (Research suggests the population is split nearly evenly between introverts and extroverts, she said.)

Others tend to define introversion more in terms of how one responds to social stimulation. “The key feature of introversion is that social energy tends to overwhelm you more quickly, and you need more time to restore,” said Marisa Franco, the author of “Platonic: How the Science of Attachment Can Help You Make — and Keep — Friends.”

While the terms “introvert,” “shy” and even “social anxiety” are often used interchangeably, they are not the same. The American Psychological Association defines shyness as the tendency to feel awkward or tense during social interactions. Social anxiety disorder, on the other hand, is a mental health condition characterized by an intense and persistent fear of being watched and judged by others that gets in the way of daily life.

“Introverts are mistaken for being antisocial,” said Susan Cain, the author of “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking.” “Actually, they're differently social.”

Ms. Cain said that means that, in general, introverts “prefer to lavish their social energy on their intimates, while extroverts get more of a charge from going to the proverbial cocktail party full of new people to meet.”

Ms. Killam added that “introverts tend to make friends more gradually, whereas extroverts are more likely to have ‘friends at first sight’ experiences.”

Yet she believes that while introverts tend to prefer small groups of close friends, it's also healthy for them to interact with acquaintances, or have friendly conversations with strangers.

“All people benefit from those casual interactions,” Ms. Killam said. “A lot of introverts I know, myself included, love spending time in coffee shops working on our laptops or reading a book, because it’s a way to be around people and get that sense of feeling connected to the community.”

She added, “Overall, it’s beneficial for everyone to chat with the barista and wave to your neighbor and things like that.”

Introvert-approved approaches to friendship

Though public discourse around introversion has ramped up in the past decade (there is now an unofficial World Introvert Day), much of the guidance on making and maintaining friendships still feels geared toward extroverts and their enthusiasm for social interaction.

When I told Ms. Cain that the advice to put oneself out there makes me recoil, she said she felt a similar way.

Fortunately, Ms. Cain and the other experts assured me that an introvert doesn’t have to become a social butterfly in order to have thriving, healthy friendships. These strategies can help.

Take the initiative

Introverts tend to not be fans of spontaneous hangouts or making social plans on the fly, Dr. Helgoe said.

For that reason, taking the first step is a useful tactic, Dr. Franco said. Many people believe extroverts are more naturally suited to initiating plans, but it is a learned skill, not an inherent personality trait, she said — one that comes with the added benefit of offering control.

“Initiation means you have the power to choose an activity that fits with how you like to socialize,” Dr. Franco said. “If you can embrace being the one to initiate interactions, even if you are an introvert, then you get to choose the activity that is the most restorative to you.”

If the plans you make fall through, well then, huzzah! You get some unexpected alone time, said Dr. Helgoe, who rejoices in canceled plans.

“My best friend and I joke that we are so understanding with each other about it,” she said, laughing.

Seek out comfortable people and comfortable places

Introverts prefer to stay in their comfort zones, Dr. Helgoe said, and they also like spending time with “comfortable people,” meaning friends who don’t feel compelled to talk the entire time you are together (or expect you to). Get-togethers that revolve around doing an activity may feel more pleasant than engaging in social events that rely on talking, she said.

An easy way to gauge whether you find someone “comfortable” is to pay close attention to how you feel after spending time with them.

“Introverts might find a given friend really energizing,” Ms. Killam said. “So they could spend hours on end with a given person and not feel depleted at all, even though, in general, spending time around other people can be depleting for them.”

Seeking out comfortable people in comfortable places is applicable even if you’re on the hunt for new friends. Rather than “berating introverts to leave their comfort zones, as if that is an end unto itself,” Dr. Helgoe said, it is far more helpful to tell them to look for friends who fit into their existing rhythms and interests.

“What do you do naturally and easily?” she said. “What excites you? Is it caring for your pets? Running or exploring nature? Writing? Reading? Painting or photography? Cooking? Any activity, even the largely solitary ones, have communal spaces.”

When making new friends, lean into your natural “opener” tendencies

Social research has described a group of people called “openers,” Dr. Franco said, “who tend to be good at getting people to open up.”

Introverts often fall in that category: They are good listeners who ask questions and prefer to develop strong bonds with a small group of friends. Research shows that introverts tend to experience a greater boost in feelings of social connectedness when engaging in intimate conversations than extroverts do.

“Having a deep, meaningful conversation might mean a lot more to an introvert,” Ms. Killam said. “I’ll speak about myself, for example. I love long one-on-one dinners with friends.” She said she finds them “very nourishing for my soul.”

“I think that’s a general truth for introverts,” she added. “We tend to feel energized by interactions like that, that go a little bit deeper.”

So while the thrill of canceled plans may never fade for people like me, it’s heartening to know that I don’t need to be the life of the party to reap the benefits of friendship.

“I think the message for people who are introverts is: Don’t view your introversion as an impediment,” Dr. Franco said. “Instead, think of it as a style of connecting.”