

The rise of the introvert

An opportunity to turn from toxic drive to reflective innovation.

By Dr Nelisha Wickremasinghe

Extravert¹ characteristics and capabilities are valued and encouraged in Western cultures. Talking a lot, executing, getting things done, risk taking, quick decision making and the preference for high levels of stimulation are common habits of extraverts and we see these habits thrive in competitive, evaluative cultures dominated by **toxic drive**². Organisational culture is increasingly defined by such behaviours.

The recent state of lock down triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic has seen most people grounded at home without opportunities to socialise, go to work, engage in taken-for-granted pastimes or to distract themselves in busy routines. The opportunities for extraversion have reduced. Instead we have been forced in on ourselves with time and uncertainty as our new companions.

Instead of killing time online and on screens, and instead of awaiting certainty with the impatience of a restless extravert, we could view this moment in our history as an opportunity to re-discover purpose and pleasure in a quieter, slower and less outwardly focused life. In doing so we might emerge from this crisis with new capabilities and preferences that could change the way we relate to each other and to nature.

However, it is not easy to break habits and extraverts may struggle to re-orientate in this environment. Introverts, who have long been second class citizens in extravert cultures, may do better, partly because they are more likely to be attuned to, and understand, their body's response to threat. Those who are able to notice and regulate their emotional states, which requires an inward turn, will be more resilient in these challenging times.

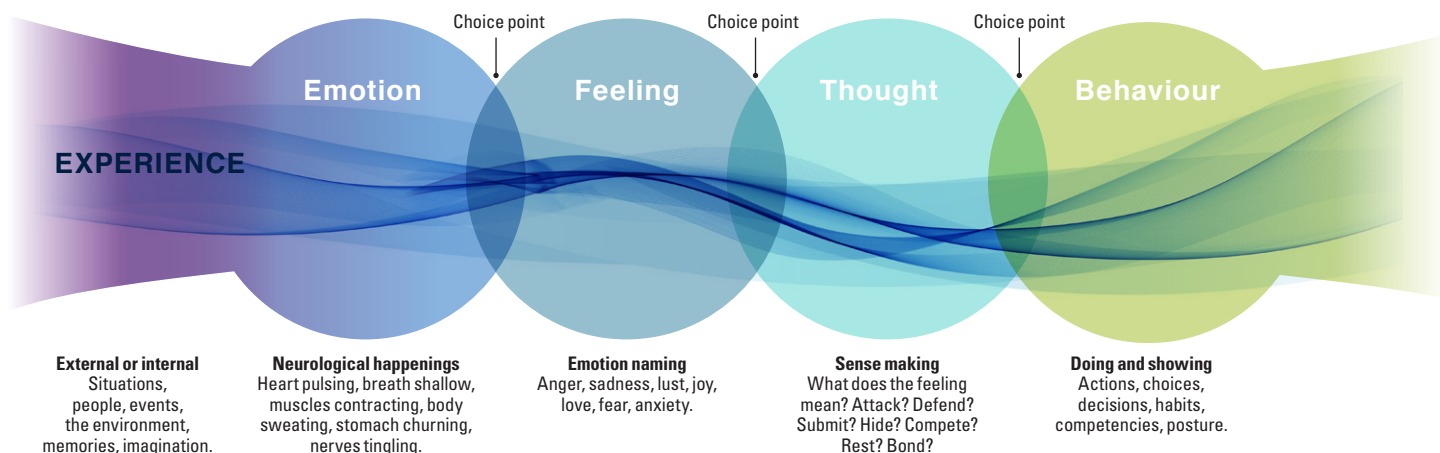
Behaviour starts in the body

Emotions³ - which we experience as bodily sensations such as a heartbeat, irregular breathing, sweating or stomach churning – motivate us to act. Thus, all *behaviour starts in the body*. Whilst this may seem obvious, the body is rarely the focus of intervention amongst developmentalists⁴ working, for example, in organisational contexts. Here we mostly see behaviour linked to 'mindsets' and a corresponding belief that, if we change the way we *think*, we can change the way we *act*. However, this popular Cognitive Behavioural approach fails to take into account the underlying *source* of our incompetent or problematic behaviour, which is that our body, expressing itself through emotion, experiences itself as being under threat.

The physiological reactions triggered by both real and imagined threat seek to minimise any bodily function, feeling, thought or behaviour that might 'waste' energy and detract from either fighting, hiding from or escaping danger. Thus, when under threat, our feeling, thinking and behavioural repertoire is significantly *narrowed*, resulting in reactive choices and decisions.

To grow mature and competent behaviours in the workplace and at home, we need to *notice* our emotions, *accurately name* the feelings they are producing in us, *carefully consider* the beliefs and thoughts we have about those feelings and only then take action accordingly. It is the accuracy and honesty of this interpretive process that determines the effectiveness of our behaviour (Figure 1).

Figure one: All behaviour starts in the body

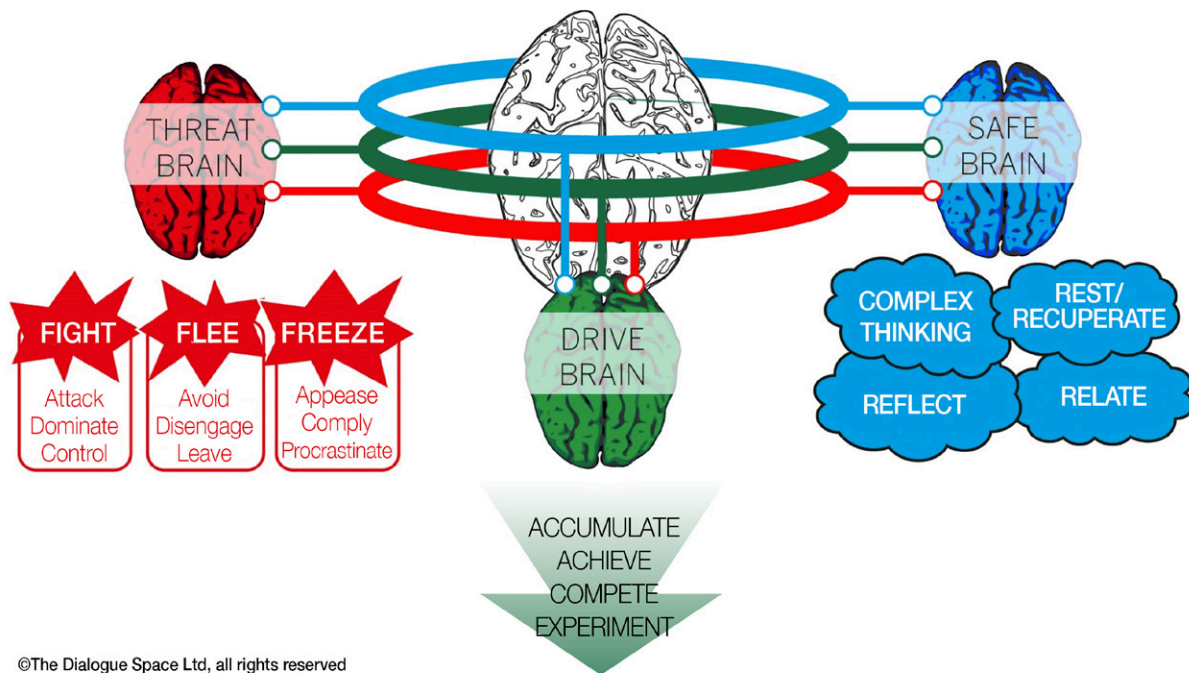


¹ I use CJ Jung's original spelling of the word

² Achievement-orientated behaviour that is motivated by threat-based emotions such as fear and anxiety.

³ Emotions are not the same as feelings – see figure one.

⁴ Such as human resource personnel, learning and development professionals, coaches etc.



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Figure two: The three motivation systems of our Trimotive brain

And it starts with our ability to notice and *regulate* threat by activating the resources of our safe brain⁵ to bring us back to a state of calm focus, or ‘centre’.

Unfortunately, many of us do not always, often or ever respond to experience in this considered way. Instead we leap from experience to action – a characteristic of the extravert – with little or no awareness or understanding of what motivates our decisions and choices. One outcome of this reactive (as opposed to reflective) response is the increased likelihood of experiencing toxic drive.

Toxic Drive

The purpose of human emotion (those bodily sensations described earlier) is to motivate action in order to achieve the basic goals of survival, accumulation and affiliation. *Threat brain*, our oldest motivation system, enables us to recognise and respond to danger (survival). *Drive brain* motivates us to seek out pleasurable and rewarding experiences (accumulation). *Safe brain* motivates us to rest, recover and form relationships with others (affiliation). Ideally, we need all three motivation systems working together in a balanced way and regulating each other. Unfortunately, many of us get caught in unhelpful habits which are sustained because our motivation systems are ‘dis-integrated’ and out of balance.

Usually the cause of dis-integration is an over-active threat brain.

Toxic drive – so common today – is achievement-orientated behaviour that is motivated by threat. We see it in compulsive, addictive, stressed and energy draining behaviours. Healthy drive, which is what most organisations aspire to but neither nurture nor realise, is achievement-orientated behaviour motivated by the emotions of our ‘safe brain’. This kind of behaviour is more likely to be value aligned, sustainable, satisfying and energising. It is the regulation of our motivation systems (see Figure 2) which grows and sustains maturity and resilience.

Behaviour that is unconsciously motivated by threat – meaning we are unaware, or deny, that our actions are driven by underlying fear, anxiety or anger – is frequently compulsive, addictive and extreme. I call this *toxic drive*. When we are unconscious of this process, we tend to justify and rationalise these behaviours and, in doing so, make them seem normal. This is the current situation in many organisations where long hours, heavy workloads and punitive evaluation processes are tolerated and hold people in a *threat---toxic-drive---threat* brain loop.

⁵ See Figure 2 – The Trimotive Brain – where safe brain, stimulated by our parasympathetic nervous system, enables us to rest, recuperate, bond with others and engage in reflective thought

Toxic drive and extraversion

Most of us live and work in environments that do not support or value safe brain practices and states. In other words, we are not given or cannot find regular opportunities and time to notice our emotions, reflect on our feelings, cultivate reciprocal, trusting relationships and think deeply about our purpose and values or the challenges facing us at home or at work.

Instead, many of us orientate and evaluate our lives around ‘externalities’: what we *have* and *do* and not what we *are*. Living like this we have become increasingly focused and dependent on other people’s evaluations of us because what is real and important has become that which is external to us.⁶

Through our screens, on billboards, across our neon cities, from the soundwaves, in the constant flow of social media content, in new products, fast moving fads and fashions, twenty-four hour access and windows overlooking the global world, where do we find time and space for quiet, honest contemplation and solitude? Our inner realities are blocked out by constant digital and social content or faded out by drugs, alcohol, food and dead or shallow sleep. Or they go unnoticed as the days speed by.

Sometimes a strong image or intuition will surface within us, yet before we understand its meaning and message, we dismiss it as fantasy, imagination, or a mere ‘nothing’. “*Oh, it’s nothing,*” we say, “*it’s nothing.*” No *thing* – in other words it is not an external object which has prescribed meaning and form.

One outcome of our reliance on externalities is that we grow up having little or no sense of who we are, what we need and want and what our self-defined purpose in life might be. Dependent on outside sources, our ability to experience intrinsic self-worth, which is not reliant on opinion or approval, is diminished. And we are becoming very familiar with this problem in the sometimes tragic, but often debilitating, outcomes of friending, unfriending, liking, blocking and opinionating on social media platforms.

Extraverts are particularly prone to toxic drive because the focus of their interest and appreciation is in the *objects* that make up their world. They are motivated to seek out people, action and events and are attracted to contexts where they can direct their energy outwards. This means they may be less sensitive to their inner intelligence, which offers deeper insights into their emotional, mental and social wellbeing.

In our culture, the extravert tendency, preference or personality is highly prized, so much so that introverts sometimes *pretend* they are extravert in order to be accepted into organisations or social groups. Once in the extravert flow it is difficult to get out. Extraverts⁷ make our capitalist, consumerist, charismatic⁸ world turn. And that world turns fast.

In acquisitive, object-oriented cultures, value is measured through how much we produce and accumulate or the status we have achieved – and can display. What matters is what can be seen, owned and flaunted. This is to value *doing* over *being*, where our busyness and productivity become not a *means* to life but life itself. And so, action for the sake of action becomes a survival imperative that our threat brain registers and remains alert to. I act therefore I am. If I stop acting, I cease to exist. This is our threat brain motivating us to do more and more, and it is an underlying dynamic for many extraverts.

In the Covid-19 lockdown, many familiar externalities are being withdrawn. We cannot socialise, engage in non-essential shopping, take part in events or travel - a situation which is far more likely to distress extraverts than introverts. However, it is in these periods of significant cultural derailment that new opportunities for growth can occur.

An opportunity for growth?

Perhaps now is the moment to reflect on quality over quantity and depth over breadth. A chance to improve our lives by understanding the relationship between action and contemplation.

The introvert personality is a constellation of qualities and characteristics that include being reflective, calm, sensitive, shy, quiet, solitary, thoughtful, detailed, serious, slow, unassertive, patient, cerebral, gentle, self-aware, inquiring and risk-averse. These are very rarely the qualities that are sought after or nurtured in the workplaces to which many of us will return after this crisis has passed. Yet they are some of the qualities that will help us both understand and live through the extraordinary events of recent times.

The thread that runs through this unfolding story is loss. We will all feel it through actual or imagined experiences that trigger powerful threat brain emotions. Whether it be the loss of health, income, loved ones, basic resources, routines, relationships or a loss of identity and purpose through being away from work, the emotional consequences are similar.

⁶ (Wickremasinghe, 2020)

⁷ One of the most common corporate profiles, using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, is ESTJ.

⁸ Susan Cain, in her book *Quiet: the power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*, refers to the *culture of personality* which is obsessed with charm, performance and image. The public impression you make is more important than inner values, integrity and how you are in private.

All behaviour starts in the body. Those who remain resilient during and through times of loss and hardship will be those who are able to notice and bring compassionate attention to their threat brain emotions. Yet in cultures which promote extraversion, loss is felt as an absence that must be replaced as quickly as possible. So, we frantically go online to ‘stay connected’, we stockpile groceries and we draw up home schedules to keep us occupied and entertained. This, we think, is coping. However, what this response misses is the crucial reflection and sense-making that is necessary for us to learn and emerge from our difficulties.

William Bridges in his book *Transitions* refers to this as being in ‘the neutral zone’, which is,

*‘A moratorium from the conventional activity of your everyday existence,’ where, ‘only in the apparently aimless activity of your time alone can you do the important business of self-transformation’.*⁹

Introverts are more able and willing to enter, and survive in, the neutral zone. They are less likely to be overwhelmed or surprised by the emotions, feelings and thoughts that accompany loss and will relate to the sense of emptiness with greater equilibrium. Why? Because generally their attention is inward looking. They are more likely to be aware of their body states, feelings and thoughts, and are probably already familiar with the doubts and anxieties that lurk there – sensations and thoughts that busy extraverts keep at bay. Introverts will also be more patient when answers are slow to emerge and will embrace the opportunity for a considered reappraisal of purpose and meaning in their life.

Extraverts will want to speed up the process, to get back to normal or invent new ways to leap over the abyss that opens between the experience of loss and emergent new beginnings. However, spending time in the abyss is precisely what is required right now. The *opportunity* in this crisis is the time to retreat, reflect and re-orientate. If we don’t, the chances are that we will simply return to our old routines but this time carrying a new layer of unease and fear that sensitises our threat brain and makes us even more vulnerable to toxic loops of feeling, thinking and behaving.

Given that we humans find it hard to break our habits, it is likely that extraverts and introverts will continue to approach and survive this time in their preferred ways. Whilst difference is to be valued and each has something to learn

from the other, in *this* particular situation the introvert’s greater capacity to enjoy the *quality* of a pared down, solitary existence and to engage in deeper inquiries into how the body and mind is responding, will grow their resilience and keep them open to learning and adaptation.

Quality and depth in our conversations and relationships will also support us when we return from our isolation – resilient or not. Thus organisations, if they are at all concerned with the long-term wellbeing of their people, will need to make space and time for people to reflect, re-calibrate and recover.

The *hidden* pandemic we have been living with for many years now is the one that embeds itself in people’s mental life, creating misery and despair. It is the inner critic telling us we are not enough and other ruminative thoughts about our worth and status that keep us spinning in threat brain loops. The World Health Organisation tells us that one in four people will be affected by mental disorders at some point in their lives, placing mental health problems among the leading cause of ill-health and disability worldwide¹⁰.

If we do not turn towards our inner lives and address what is happening there, the effects of the visible Covid-19 pandemic will live on and thrive in our threat-sensitive bodies and minds. The introverts among us can lead the way in this, and we should listen to them. To do this, extraverts will need to talk less, do less and try to stop solving problems for a while - which will be hard.

Carl Jung, who still has the first and final words on extraversion and introversion, hypothesised that these two *attitude types* probably have biological or innate origins and that the E or I disposition we are born with will influence all further development in our sensing, intuiting, feeling and thinking functions¹¹. Jung believed that only very few people could develop both capacities equally.¹² This would seem to be so. And I am not suggesting that extraverts try to *become* introverted but that they open a space for people with this preference to share their thoughts and ideas. And that they take them seriously. In doing so extraverts might expand their capabilities to include some introvert characteristics (listening, for example) and, in the airtime given over to them, introverts might begin to externalise some of the thoughts and ideas they often keep to themselves. Workplaces of the future need to be designed for both types to contribute and thrive.

⁹ (Bridges, 2004)

¹⁰ https://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/

¹¹ The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, adapting Jung’s work, later added another two functions, Judging and Perceiving.

¹² (Jung, 2017)

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