



Trina M'Lot is shy and introverted and must work hard to conquer those social impediments. (Glenn Olsen for The Globe and Mail)

When is shyness an 'illness'?

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If social media is truly a reflection of social reality, we live in an era of unprecedented extroversion. From tweeters broadcasting their every meal and nap to Facebook albums full of “group hug” shots, it would seem that no one stands against the wall and watches any more.

But the reality is that introverts make up roughly one-third of the population, according to various studies. A large-scale United States study published last year found that 47 per cent of teens identified themselves as shy. (Their parents, tellingly, set the wallflower bar even higher; 62 per cent said they felt their kids were shy.)

With schools stressing collaboration skills, and parents stressing about their offspring’s job prospects, introversion – which is defined by a preference for solo work, an aversion for public speaking and large social groups – is increasingly considered a trait to be corrected.

U.S. research has found that teachers are more likely to assume that quiet kids don’t know the answers; and parents, especially fathers, are more critical of their shy children. On a report card, phrases such as “likes to work alone” or “doesn’t participate in class discussion” translate into bad marks for social progress. Years ago, a teen who would rather read quietly in their room for hours on a Saturday might be thought of as thoughtful – now, it’s more likely their parent will pace outside the door, worrying about their development. (Shyness and introversion aren’t the same thing - although there is significant overlap, not all introverts experience the nervousness or awkward feelings characteristic of shyness.)

Is shyness in our kids something to be corrected, and if so, to what degree? Since 1987, when social anxiety disorder officially entered the psychiatry’s diagnostic manual, its symptoms expanded to include stage fright and text anxiety, as well children who “shrink” and “cringe.” (In 1994, the manual added the clarification that anxiety should not be confused with shyness.) Today the rates of clinical anxiety among teenagers in Canada have reached 7 per cent, with social anxiety the most common diagnosis.

The debate about where to draw the line between shyness (and introversion) and social anxiety is an example of the complications of diagnosing mental illness in teenagers, who are, by nature, mercurial, and for whom the stress of new responsibilities is not only normal, but required for their development.

According to Christopher Lane, a professor at Northwestern University and the author of *Shyness: How Normal Behaviour Became a Sickness*, a culture that too quickly equates shyness with anxiety saddles introverted kids

(and their anxious parents) with the belief that, diagnosed or not, they better fix themselves. And if that easy fix is medication, suggests Kevin Aho, a philosophy professor at Florida Gulf Coast University who studies the cultural influences on health and medicine, then anti-depressants and anti-anxiety drugs risk becoming the equivalent of a pharmaceutical nose job. “We [use] them cope with the social conventions we inhabit,” says Aho. “They allow you to be the social butterfly that is privileged in our society.”

There are, of course, teenagers who suffer from severe social anxiety – who refuse to go to school or can’t socialize with peers – and who are at an increased risk of depression and drug use; many of them never get the help they need, says Robert Coplan, a psychologist at Carleton University who researches shyness and anxiety.

But scoop up too many teens into a mental-health diagnosis, and there’s a risk of mis-labelling youth with a lifelong “illness.” Not every parent is buying the argument that their introverted offspring might be in need of clinical attention. Lynn, a mom in Burlington, Ont., remembers responding with surprise when being asked by a friend whether she had thought of putting her daughter into therapy for her shyness. In preschool, Lynn had to sit beside her for her class picture; she was often the only parent who remained in the room for activities. Sports day at school was a “nightmare,” because her daughter, now 12, was nervous about being matched up with students she didn’t know. She’s coping better now with her shyness, says Lynn – she dreads school presentations but focused on getting a good mark. Her mom has stressed this point: “When someone tells you, ‘You’re shy,’ it’s not an insult, it’s just who you are.”

A quiet nature has advantages – such as the power of observation and contemplation. But, to reduce the risk of greater anxiety especially in teenage years, Coplan is researching early interventions for shy children – practising social interactions, for instance, in the same way that boisterous kids might benefit from mindfulness. Educating parents is also important – the goal, he says, is not correct the personality trait – or to pathologize it – but to help kids learn coping skills and for parents to watch for signs of stress or anxiety that may develop.

As an introvert herself, Sandra Verwey recognized the trait in her daughter, Trina M’Lot, more easily than the other outgoing members of the family. She purposely signed Trina up for sports activities to build her confidence. When Trina was a teenager, the two of them practised greeting lines and prepared for social occasions.

Today, M’Lot, a 22-year-old graphic design student at Vancouver Island University, recalls those anxious years of being “terrified” by group activities and social outings as growth experiences – crediting sports and her mom for helping her manage those fears. The notion that her shyness could be considered a mental-health issue draws a laugh. Part of a burgeoning movement to elevate the abilities and benefits of introversion, she is using her fourth-year thesis to develop a poster campaign to encourage more students from elementary age to university more accepting of their more modest natures. “There’s nothing wrong with a person who has a quiet way of going about things.”