

New research sheds light on teen introversion

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(Medical Xpress)—New University of Maryland-led research is taking a deeper look into preference-for-solitude, a widespread, but poorly understood type of social withdrawal. Appearing in the *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* and titled "Preference-for-Solitude and Adjustment Difficulties in Early and Late Adolescence," the study brings attention to behaviors clinical psychologists have historically confused with shyness.

Through this new research, Kenneth Rubin Ph.D, and doctoral candidate Jennifer Wang of UMD's Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, along with their collaborators, are deepening investigations into preference-for-solitude.

"Although much is known about shyness, little is known about preference-for-solitude," Rubin and Wang write. "Even less is known about its relations with adjustment across different periods of adolescence."

Comparing behaviors of social avoidance and unsociability between age groups, the researchers found that preference-for-solitude was more strongly associated with adjustment difficulties in 8th grade than in 12th grade. Among the difficulties they identify are greater anxiety/depression, emotion dysregulation, and lower self-esteem. But why do these difficulties predominate in younger teens?

"In my opinion, preference-for-solitude may have been more problematic . . . [because] early adolescence is when things like popularity and belonging in cliques are the most salient and important," Wang says. "Fortunately, as time goes on, not only is solitude more acceptable, kids also become more appreciative of the many benefits that solitude brings."

Rubin and Wang conclude that since preference-for-solitude was associated with lower social competence across adolescence, social skills interventions may prove fruitful. They particularly endorse the possible benefits of intervening sooner rather than later. Of course, this leaves the researchers—as well as school counselors and educators seeking to help introverted teens through the social pitfalls of middle and high school—with a new question: what might such social skills interventions look like?

The study has gained the notice of popular psychology author Sophia Dembling, who lauded its insight and relevance in the blog she writes for *Psychology Today* about the nature of introversion and the myths of our extroversion-fixated culture. "Indeed and hoorah," Dembling says of Rubin and Wang's work to understand preference-for-solitude. "Research is finally starting to go our way."

Dembling also offered a few of her own suggestions for the social skills interventions that Rubin and Wang call for: "Kids who prefer solitude in junior high might need extra validation from parents to counteract negative peer messages. . . . Kids might benefit from training in [social skills](#)—and that doesn't mean just urging them to get out there and join the gang. . . . All kids could benefit from learning 'solitude skills' to help them deal with and respect solitude."

More information: www.education.umd.edu/CollegeNews/2013/Wangetal_2013.pdf

Provided by University of Maryland

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