

*Forget being the loudest voice in
the room - staying silent can be
just as (if not more) impactful,
says GEMMA ASHKAM*

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THE POWER OF BEING QUIET

"WHY ARE YOU SO QUIET?" Whether you've grown up asking it, or ever been told to speak up, the message has always been the same – quiet is bad. To the socially confident, quietness was something unnerving, boring, lacking personality. To the socially floundering, quietness was the birthmark you wished you could erase. Well, it was. Call it the 'Eleven effect' – the name of the often-silent character in *Stranger Things*, whose solitary disposition we collectively embraced – but quiet is officially in.

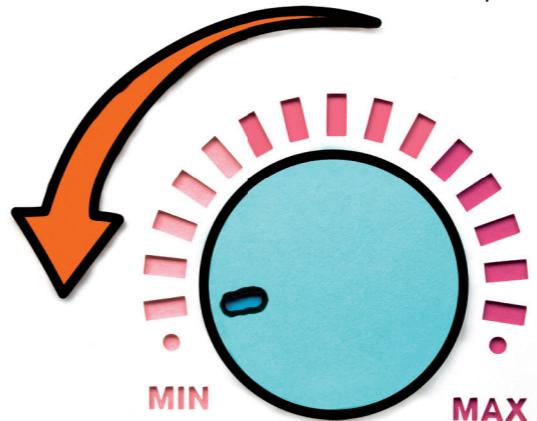
Proof? The 11th-most-watched TED Talk of all time is called *The Power Of Introverts*. Googling, "Why am I so awkward?" – a search term that spiked in 2011 and hasn't dipped since – has allowed the internet to bring like-volumed people together. Take Twitter's funny #introvertproblems, or Gemma Correll's witty cartoons on social anxiety ("Hell is other people before coffee"), which have earned her 420k Instagram followers. Even science has the quiet person's back. Introverts (who prefer their own company and call an Uber the second someone shouts "group karaoke!") were once criticised for making less effort than extroverts (who socialise big and enjoy those ear-pounding exercise classes with lasers and garage music). Now, we know it's actually down to our nervous systems. Introverts' systems are more sensitive to surroundings, so they crave quiet; extroverts' systems react less, so they crave stimulation – psychologist Hans Eysenck found that if you place lemon juice on your tongue, highly reactive introverts will actually produce more saliva. Which suddenly makes being quieter seem less like a defect and more like a superpower.

With even the chattiest among us being drowned out by fake news and social-media spambots (nothing says genuine friendship like ‘gainlikes_137936699’), socialising is moving from an extreme sport to a generation of happy part-time talkers – and even noise fans are catching on...

Saving no to noise

You only have to listen to a politician's speech to know that what isn't said (think of Obama's silky pauses) can be more impressive than what is (something about a wall). "There's so much 'noise' in life that we may pay more attention when someone provides a better-quality response, rather than blurting out the first thing that comes to mind," says Dr Laurie Helgoe, a clinical psychologist.

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Gemma Correll's
Insta illustrations
bring humour to
everyday anxieties

HELL IS
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and author of *Introvert Power*. We've had the buzz-phrase 'reach out' drummed into us, but Dr Helgoe believes there's also merit to holding back. "A quieter person can be a refreshing alternative to quick-paced conversations that don't go anywhere. They listen. They respect privacy, so are good secret-keepers. They are also, as my extroverted sister tells me, great at coming up with the witty observation that no one else thought of because they let themselves sit back, take in all the information and respond when they're ready."

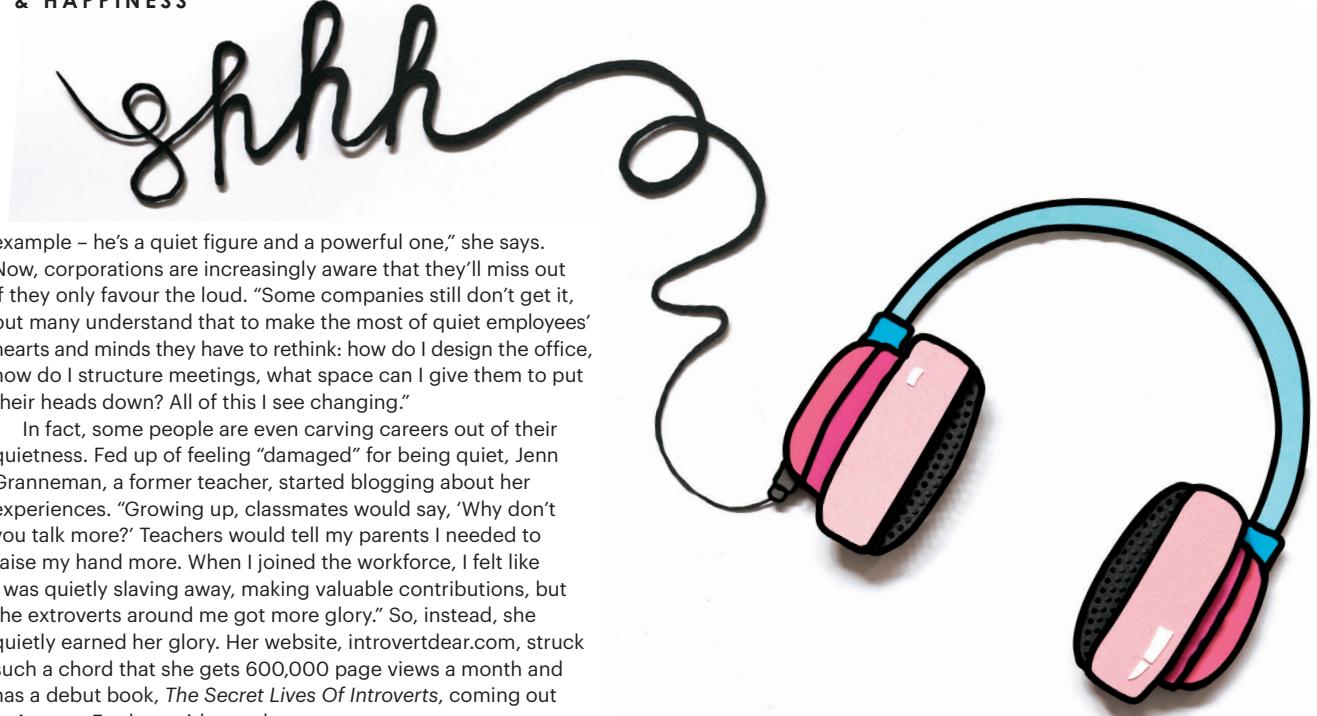
And the benefits of interacting quietly aren't just being trailblazed by the naturally quiet – now, the loud want in, too. "People are claiming their quiet space – the trends for yoga and wearing noise-cancelling headphones reflect this. Society has become so ambitious and on-the-go, asking members to be 'on' all the time, that even extroverts feel it's too much," explains Susan Cain, the speaker behind the aforementioned 16 million-viewed TED hit. Anyone who's ever longed to be louder likely knows her name. *Quiet: The Power Of Introverts In A World That Can't Stop Talking*, her debut book normalising the less chatty among us, has topped best-seller lists since its 2013 release; and its 2016 sequel, *Quiet Power*, is spreading the quiet-is-OK assurance to teenagers. A look in your local café shows many are already on board, though. "People are drawn to the quiet coffee shop where you can be by yourself and not look weird; where you can enjoy being with people you don't have to talk to," adds Dr Helgoe. Like apart-together relationships – where couples deliberately spend weekdays apart or prefer living separately – we're now long-distance socialising, where we flit between verbal contact and friend-ing over Wi-Fi. Sitting alone was once the pity seat; now, it's a 'table for won'.

Flexing your quiet muscle

While some of the world's biggest stars build their careers around verbally under-sharing – Kate Moss, FKA twigs, Victoria Beckham, even the Queen

— quiet has traditionally been the wrong professional label. “My most surprising criticism has been the reaction to my success,” explains Samantha, 26, a publicist. “I moved out when I was 18, got a degree in political science and then went to do my master’s at New York University. But the common reaction was, ‘Wow, quiet Samantha? Really?’ To me, just because I was a bit reserved didn’t mean I didn’t have potential to do big things.”

It's this outdated 'charisma bias' towards the loud – research shows that charismatic CEOs are paid more, but don't deliver better results – that led Cain to launch Quiet Revolution (quietrev.com). It's an organisation that teaches companies how to harness the best of the 30-50% of us who are quiet employees. "Tech culture was one of the first forces to nudge us in this direction. Look at the great engines of technological development and you see quiet people. Microsoft's Bill Gates is the perfect ➤



example – he's a quiet figure and a powerful one," she says. Now, corporations are increasingly aware that they'll miss out if they only favour the loud. "Some companies still don't get it, but many understand that to make the most of quiet employees' hearts and minds they have to rethink: how do I design the office, how do I structure meetings, what space can I give them to put their heads down? All of this I see changing."

In fact, some people are even carving careers out of their quietness. Fed up of feeling "damaged" for being quiet, Jenn Granneman, a former teacher, started blogging about her experiences. "Growing up, classmates would say, 'Why don't you talk more?' Teachers would tell my parents I needed to raise my hand more. When I joined the workforce, I felt like I was quietly slaving away, making valuable contributions, but the extroverts around me got more glory." So, instead, she quietly earned her glory. Her website, introvertdear.com, struck such a chord that she gets 600,000 page views a month and has a debut book, *The Secret Lives Of Introverts*, coming out in August. Further evidence that you don't need to be loud to be heard.

The low-volume future

In many ways, we've been lowering our offline volume for a while. For one, our crippling discomfort at leaving a voicemail. Second, even back in 2015, Bangor University found that 72% of 18 to 25 year olds felt more comfortable expressing themselves using an emoji than words. Psychologist Ty Tashiro, author of new title *Awkward: The Science Of Why We're Socially Awkward And Why That's Awesome*, believes we're part of a new wave of openly socially shy. "I think that twenty-and-thirtysomethings will be the fulcrum point for a cultural shift," he says. "Young adults have grown up at the forefront of the social-media age and a brazen reality-television era. They've grown weary of so many people shouting for their attention, and are looking for a more genuine experience with others." Whereas volume once attracted us, "drawn to people's ability to take command of situations or social groups", Tashiro now believes "fairness, kindness and loyalty are weighted far more heavily".

A quieter, less intense way of interacting is also transforming traditionally 'loud' activities – restaurants that let you order via interfaces rather than face-to-face; hair salons with a quiet seat to skip the chatter; tech-free holiday retreats, where you don't even have the noise of your phone's notifications. If you're dating and are bored of hearing the "What do you like on Netflix?" opener, London's Shhh Dating organises silent speed-dating events where you play non-verbal games and gaze into each other's eyes. Their organisers believe that without words – without the hard sell – you can see who someone *really* is.

The heart of the quiet movement is this acceptance that it's OK to step away from the 'saleswoman' ideal, which we've long been told is the only way to be. "In the 20th century, Western culture made a shift to accommodate the needs of businesses to sell products, and the needs of the entertainment industry to present larger-than-life figures. There was this imperative to go out, live among people you didn't know well, and sell yourself. We went through a shift from what cultural historians call the culture of character to a culture of personality," explains Cain. "Today, it's beginning to change." And part of that change is giving ourselves space to think, to listen, to recharge. It's rediscovering that what makes us powerful isn't our volume, it's what's in our minds, even when the volume is on mute. ●

"12% OF 18 TO 25 YEAR OLDS FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE USING EMOJIS THAN WORDS"

HOW TO PUT YOURSELF OUT THERE – QUIETLY

Susan Cain's tips on making people listen without being loud

- **Speak early in meetings.** The ideas submitted first are called 'anchoring ideas'. Other people direct their attention towards you and you psychologically feel part of things. Wait, and you slope to the margins.
- **Try tactical silence.** Making a complaint? Negotiating a bill? If you make your point and then deliberately stay quiet, most people will likely say anything (hopefully, a helpful compromise) to fill the uncomfortable silence.
- **Have a listening limit.** Dinner for two turning into a monologue for one? A simple: "I've loved hearing about X. That reminds me, I must tell you about X." It shows interest, but also that you want to make them a part of your news, too.
- **Say it with a gesture.** If someone butts in before you've finished speaking, Cain says using a hand motion, such as slightly raising your palm, to alert them that you're still going, is more effective than trying to out-volume an interrupter.
- **Believe what you say.** Someone who speaks less frequently but with conviction – not just conviction about any old ill-considered idea, but about something that makes sense – can end up having a lot of power in a discussion.