

Being Introverted at a Boarding School

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March 7

Being an introvert at boarding school is probably one of the toughest challenges to face for students who relish alone time.

The definition of an introvert is simply “a shy, reticent person.” However, this doesn’t fully explain the complexity of introversion. Although introverts relish alone time, they don’t necessarily hate being around people. When they find a group they’re comfortable with, introverts can actually be outgoing and even the center of attention. The downside is, after long periods of exposure to people, introverts need alone time to recharge before going into the next social setting.

Boarding schools are systematically positioned against the success of introverts. One of the challenges of being an introvert in the boarding school setting is that given the rigorous and highly regulated nature of our schedules, we are not afforded the time we need to recharge from social interactions in order to achieve our full potential productivity. Furthermore, the communal nature of the social scene at boarding schools reinforces the idea that if a person doesn’t participate, they are missing out and are branded as anti-social. Conversely, extroverts are more easily able flourish at boarding schools than introverts because they relish in the camaraderie of dorm life.

One aspect of boarding school that particularly caters to the extrovert is the concept of mandatory afternoon team based activities. While most introverts enjoy participating in something they’re passionate about, or something they’re good at, most activities are draining. For example, tennis practice is something I look forward to because of the team, and because it’s something that I enjoy doing. Other sports and activities I’ve participated in, however, have seemed more like a chore. After a seven hour school day, the last thing I want to do is drag myself to an activity I have no interest in.

This is where introverts and extroverts differ in boarding school life. As an introvert, I feel drained at the end of a long school day. The only thing I want to do is be by myself for a couple of hours, before I am ready to dive back into the social scene. But I can’t do that. After school, it’s straight to sports, then to dinner, and then you realize that you’ve been on the go non-stop from around 7AM to 7PM. That’s twelve hours straight of constant interaction.

I’m a person diagnosed with clinical anxiety. During my time at boarding school, I’ve found that when I’m not able to make alone time for myself, my anxiety becomes more severe. I suspect this may be the case with other students as well. I think this phenomena is part of the reason why we see so many anxious students at boarding school. Maybe it’s not because they’re inherently anxious or suffering from some ambiguous mental illness. Maybe it’s simply that they are

introverted and just need a little alone time before being driven back into an environment in which they can't feel fully comfortable.

The inability to satisfy my basic need for alone time coupled with my anxiety has made life at a boarding school life incredibly challenging at times. I can't stand the constant fake interactions. I can't stand required afternoon activities, or meals where one seems forced to interact with others. Anyone can find boarding life exhausting at times, but it's worse for introverts. Not only are we drained from constant social interactions, but the effect is tripled by anxiety. Although I usually enjoy school, some days my mental illness causes me to dread even the simple action of dragging myself out of bed at the thought of interacting with other people. *People*. Try going through a day when the one thing you want avoid is basically unavoidable. It's not so easy.

Introverts can be mistaken as lazy, but it's not our fault. We can't help but be on the verge of passing out from exhaustion when school pushes us into social settings we don't want to take part in. The most difficult part is that when you'd rather spend your entire Saturday peacefully sitting in your room reading, or watching Netflix, you're seen as some weird, antisocial outcast. We aren't. All we really need is time to rest with ourselves. Time to stay in bed and relax by ourselves. Picture a businessman who has gone without his morning coffee. He's tired, angry, and doesn't want anything to do with anybody. Their coffee is an introvert's alone time, with which we cure our tiredness from being overexposed to people all day long.

Although boarding schools often claim to offer support for students who experience mental health issues, the reality is that they inherently function against introverts and promote an atmosphere of anxiety and insecurity. Because students who don't participate in school activities are branded as outsiders, introverts often have a difficult time navigating whether to take the rest they desperately need, or to interact with their friends in an effort to avoid being outcast. Furthermore, while some mandatory after-school activities are friendly to introverts, when students are forced to participate in something they're not passionate about, that activity turns from a stress-reliever to a source of stress.

The combination of introversion and anxiety is difficult. Schools preach about the importance of the mental health when, in actuality, personally it seems as though the reality of mental health is something the administration doesn't want to—or isn't able to—address.

The fact is, mental health affects more and more students each year, so it's time for our schools to start taking it more seriously. If schools want to make meaningful change and truly improve the experience of students, they should consider a dramatic change in the overall structure of the school day and afternoon requirements to better accommodate all students, including us introverts.