Where You Lean

A Parts-Informed Guide to Personality Tests

Walk along any creek in Colorado and you will meet a cottonwood that leans. Years of wind taught it to grow that way, and the lean is now part of its beauty. Nobody calls that tree broken. A personality test is a way of asking which direction the wind has been blowing and how you grew to meet it. Come with curiosity, and bring a little tenderness for the one who answers the questions.

Why People Love These Tests

A personality test hands you words for something you likely already feel in your bones. Some of us fill up alone and some in company and many of us in a combination of the two. Some of us more readily trust what is in front of us and some more faithfully trust the hunch that rises from underground. A shared vocabulary can soften a great deal of friction between partners and between colleagues, and that gift is real.

I took the Myers-Briggs in my early twenties and was surprised to find my introversion lean. I could “do social” so well that I never saw what it cost me. When the tiredness came, I thought it was a mood swing. Knowing the lean let me make kinder choices for myself, like leaving the party after three hours. The test gave me a name for a need I had been living inside of without knowing it.

Why It Helps to Take One

1. It gives you words. Naming how you work makes it easier to ask for what you need and to hear what the people you love are asking for.
2. It starts better conversations. Two people comparing results often find a gentler way to talk about old friction, and sometimes a good laugh about the weather each has been to the other.
3. It shows your usual drivers. When the same leanings turn up again and again, they point toward the parts that tend to run your days, the way a bent branch points back toward the wind that shaped it.
4. It shows you what you cannot see. The places where a result surprises you, or feels wrong, are good places to get curious. A tree leans without knowing it, and it takes someone walking by to say so.
5. The questions themselves are a doorway. Sometimes a single question makes you stop and wonder how you actually live in relationship to the world: how you spend your energy and how you come home to yourself.
6. It is an easy way in. A short test is simpler to begin than a blank page of self-reflection.

Two Maps to Try

The Myers-Briggs map sorts people along four pairs of preferences, which combine into sixteen types.

1. Extraversion or Introversion: where you tend to turn for energy, toward people and activity or toward solitude and reflection.
2. Sensing or Intuition: whether you tend to trust what is concrete and present, or patterns and possibilities.
3. Thinking or Feeling: whether you tend to decide by logic and consistency, or by values and the effect on people.
4. Judging or Perceiving: whether you tend to like things planned and settled, or open and flexible.

Katharine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers built it from Carl Jung's work on psychological types. Jung only hinted at the fourth pair; they made it explicit.

The Big Five map, favored by researchers, measures five traits as ranges: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (how strongly you tend to feel stress and worry). Most people land somewhere in the middle of each range, which suits the idea of leaning: very few of us are bent all the way to the ground.

Free Tests to Try

The official Myers-Briggs assessment costs money. The free tests below are inspired by it and are different instruments, so your letters may not match from one to the next. Taking more than one and comparing is part of the fun.

- **Truity TypeFinder.**Myers-Briggs style, four letters, 130 questions, about 10 to 15 minutes. A brief result is free and a longer report costs extra. https://www.truity.com/test/type-finder-personality-test-new
- **16Personalities.**About 10 minutes. It uses four-letter labels like Myers-Briggs but follows its own model. The basic result is free and some extras cost money. https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test
- **Open-Source Psychometrics Big Five.**Fifty statements, about 3 to 8 minutes, free. Answers are recorded anonymously and may be used for research. https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/IPIP-BFFM/

A Parts View of Type

Each of us holds many parts, and Self, the calm and curious center, is the root that can send different ones forward as a situation asks. A four-letter type or a set of trait scores describes the branches that reach furthest, the parts that tend to lead most often. The Myers & Briggs Foundation says something close: we use all of the preferences, lean toward some, and can stretch toward the others when life calls for it.

What These Tests Cannot Do

1. The answers come from whoever is holding the pencil. A tired part, a hopeful part or a part that wants to look good can answer in the morning, and a different one at night. Studies of the Myers-Briggs questionnaire found that as many as half of people get a different type when they retake it a few weeks later.
2. The categories are rough. Scores on each pair tend to gather near the middle, so a few answers can tip a letter. Ranges, like the Big Five uses, describe a leaning more honestly.
3. Context shapes us. Family, culture, work and survival teach parts to lean one way for protection. A test can record the lean and cannot tell you whether it is your nature or an old job a part took on. Some trees lean toward the light and some lean because of the wind, and from the road they look alike.
4. Labels can turn into rules. A part may grab "I am an introvert" to excuse you from a gathering, or "I am a thinker" to keep feelings at a distance. When a label does that, it has stopped describing you and started protecting you.
5. Tests cannot see your parts or your Self. They measure what shows above ground, the shape of the crown, and say nothing about the roots, or about the steadier presence that can hold all of it.
6. They are not meant for hiring, diagnosing, or deciding who you can love or what you can become. The publisher of the Myers-Briggs assessment says the same about hiring.

Ways to Use Your Results Gently

1. Read your results as a description of your usual lean, with the same kindness you would give a tree that grew toward the only light it had.
2. When you read a type description, listen for which part says "yes, that is me" and which part says "that does not sound like me." Both are telling you something.
3. Take a test more than once, in different seasons and moods. The differences map your parts.
4. Use it to start conversations: "I lean toward needing time alone to think. What do you need?"

Questions to Sit With

- When do I lean the way my results say, and when does another part take the wheel?
- Which leanings did I grow into because family, work or culture asked for them?
- What happens in me when I stretch toward the opposite preference? Which part helps, and which part pushes back?
- If I described myself with no letters or scores at all, what would I say?

Based on the Myers-Briggs framework of Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, which draws on Carl Jung's psychological types, and on the Big Five model.

A Wider View

Find a cottonwood, or any tree that has lived through weather, and sit with your back against its trunk. Look at how it leans. Ask your parts which of them has been steering lately. Or sit beside moving water: ice in January, flood in spring, a thin bright thread in late summer, one river with many moods, each of them true. If you work with ancestors or guides, you can ask them what each of your leanings is protecting and what it is reaching for.

May you meet your leanings with tenderness.

May you forgive the wind that bent you.

May you be curious about the light you grow toward.

May you let every part of you be held by Self.

Resources

Pittenger, D. J. (1993). Measuring the MBTI...and coming up short. Journal of Career Planning and Employment, 54(1), 48-52.

Pittenger, D. J. (2005). Cautionary comments regarding the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 57(3), 210-221.

McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (1989). Reinterpreting the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator from the perspective of the five-factor model of personality. Journal of Personality, 57(1), 17-40.

Goldberg, L. R. (1992). The development of markers for the Big-Five factor structure. Psychological Assessment, 4(1), 26-42.

Myers & Briggs Foundation. Ethical use of the MBTI assessment (myersbriggs.org).