

ISFJ

(About 13.8% of the U.S. population)

ISFJs, with their strong sense of duty, can be considered the *protectors* of the world. An appropriate image for the ISFJ is that of the dependable bulwark that is always there when needed, waiting silently. As Judgers (Js), they might complain about intrusions by others. But ultimately their sense of duty compels them to do what needs to be done, without complaint.

ISFJ Personality Highlights

ISFJs like to work behind the scenes. They are quick, easygoing, neat, orderly, and driven by a higher sense of duty and obedience.

- Their **Introversion** allows them to find their source of energy within.
- Their **Sensing** shapes their view of reality, as they focus on things they can see, hear, feel, taste, and smell.
- Their **Feeling** focuses energy outward in service to others.
- Their **Judging** allows them to act in an orderly, timely fashion.

ISFJs find meaning in life by serving human needs and making others happy. Their talents lie in making sure everything is taken care of so others can succeed and accomplish their goals. Because they are focused on meeting the needs of others, they often work long hours. Friendly, respectful, unassuming, they thrive on serving quietly behind the scenes. They are devoted to doing whatever is necessary to ensure shelter and safety – warning about pitfalls and dangers and being supportive along the way.

Here are some other characteristics. ISFJs...

- Take commitments and obligations very seriously.
- Have a high sense of obligation and allegiance, coupled with strong values and a commitment to serve humanity.
- Often allow others to take advantage of them, even to the point of letting themselves become the “doormat” of a marriage, family, job, or friendship.

ISFJs in Personal Life

In relationships, as with most everything else, the ISFJ’s strong sense of duty and commitment dominates. Relationships develop slowly but surely for them. When a declaration of love or friendship comes, you can count on it being permanent. ISFJs, more than other types, may remain in relationships that long ago went bad simply because of their sense of obligation.

With their strong sense of loyalty, ISFJs may appear quite serious most of the time. It may take another type of individual to lighten their load and ease the seriousness of life's demands. Some ISFJs are quietly enticed by the bizarre and extreme. However, they give in to such longings only on special occasions or vicariously – by way of a movie or a friend's story of intrigue. Otherwise, it is generally “work first, play later.”

ISFJs at Home

Because duty, obedience, and responsibility permeate all that ISFJs do, their entire lifestyle is marked by caring and concern for others that is expressed in an orderly, well-regulated way. Relaxation is fine, but only when all work is completed. Of course, the work is never done, so ISFJs generally schedule their leisure activities. In fact, leisure may become part of their list of duties – yet another way of showing care for others.

Family events for ISFJs are very meaningful occasions. They are a chance to gather and observe tradition and rituals, and to express in action the family's importance. For ISFJs, the meaningfulness of the event is directly related to the extent they contribute to it by cooking, cleaning, and serving others. They see such efforts as a direct expression of love. No matter how reserved their behavior, ISFJs have depths of loyalty that should not be underestimated; to do so is to miss the inner quality and strength unique to this type.

As an older person, the ISFJ employs tried-and-true methods for every activity. In later years they may take time for a somewhat more relaxed schedule and become more like an Extrovert (E). Though still tempered by a large sense of social responsibility, this can be a refreshing opportunity for ISFJs to pursue their own needs. They may even enjoy some risk-taking as they grow older, though to some other types they still appear to be overly cautious. Ultimately, retirement (if there is such a thing in ISFJ terms) is yet another phase in life to be filled with meaningful activities.

ISFJs as Children

ISFJ children are a treat that every parent should be allowed to experience. Content with playing by themselves, they are relatively undemanding, neat, and obedient – in general, model children and hard-working students. As both children and adults, ISFJs may be given to streaks of stubbornness that seem entirely out of character. But even that stubbornness will give way if authority, role definition (“I'm the teacher and I want it done this way”), or some other sense of responsibility can be appealed to. ISFJs respect authority and respond accordingly. As students, ISFJs prefer teachers and courses that are organized and practical. They like following outlines and doing homework and assignments that are highly defined.

ISFJs as Parents

Parenting for the ISFJ is a serious responsibility – one that they, more than other types, recognize as a lifetime commitment. As a result, they often assume a quiet, guardian-like role. Generally, ISFJ parents are diligent, protective, and extremely patient with the many facets of the job. While each of these characteristics is admirable, ISFJ parents need to be careful to avoid the extremes of these behaviors. They run the risk of inappropriately sacrificing their own needs in favor of the children's.

ISFJs in Professional Life

For ISFJs work is fun, rewarding, satisfying, and ultimately fulfilling. If it isn't, they will probably work harder in the hope that things will improve. In general, a happy ISFJ is one who has most of the hours of the day filled with some sort of service to family, friends, or an employer. For them, work builds character. It brings growth, maturity, satisfaction, and fulfillment. In fact, parenting, relating, mating, teaching, and managing are all forms of work through which ISFJs express their sense of duty and service.

Cautious, reserved, quiet, and inwardly oriented (Introversion), ISFJs are content to work quietly by themselves. Their perceptions of the world are realistic, grounded, and oriented in the present (Sensing), and they use those facts and realities to make decisions that are interpersonally driven (Feeling). They prefer to live their daily lives in a structured, ordered, accountable manner (Judging).

ISFJs as Leaders

ISFJs are considerate, cooperative, and committed to tradition and conformity in ways that promote harmony. They prefer a democratic leadership process and are careful when seeking to influence others through relationships. They expect others to fulfill their roles thoughtfully and to support the work of other members of the team. Often more concerned about harmony than dealing with conflict constructively, their strength – promoting a sense of belonging in others – can become a disadvantage. They may be perceived as weak leaders, unwilling to fight for what they want or to stand up and defend other members of the team.

ISFJs can have high expectations of themselves and others regarding rules, regulations, appropriate behavior, and other *shoulds* and *oughts*. Breaking these boundaries or being disrespectful is a no-no. Forgiveness can be very slow to come when someone crosses the line. ISFJs are the “backbone” of organizations, and they often play a key role in maintaining institutional memory. While other types may brainstorm great ideas – from new products and programs to the next office party – little will happen without the deliberate, detailed follow-through of the ISFJ.

ISFJs generally make slow, careful decisions and then stick by them unless there is a negative impact on someone they care about. They like lots of information, filtering it through their large database of life experiences and stored knowledge, looking for what is familiar. They want concrete facts and to see how a decision will affect the people they know. They want to be supportive and will take the time needed to make sure things go right, but they don't like to leave things hanging for long. Sometimes decisions will be made in a conventional way just to reach closure.

Once ISFJs become committed to a project, their patience is considerable. They will persevere to complete the task, notwithstanding overtime or setbacks in materials, dates, or personnel. They lead by doing. They will personally do what it takes to get something done, from sweeping the floors to hosting a reception. Like other Judgers (Js), they may keep this mostly to themselves. As good Feelers (Fs), they are willing to pitch in and make a sacrifice for the good of the organization. While this may feed into being perceived as martyrs, for the ISFJ this is a fulfilling process.

Unlike leaders of some other types, ISFJs have a tolerance for detail and routine. They are motivated by established ways of accomplishing something and will work best when doing things “by the book.” When they are in charge, they expect subordinates to work within established rituals. If you follow the rules, the ISFJ believes, you’ll get it done and you’ll reap rewards. If you break the rules, you’ll be punished for the resulting failures. For the ISFJ, this is a system that works well and should work for others too.

ISFJs as Employees

Who wouldn’t want an ISFJ in their workplace? The qualities of being organized, pleasant, and a dependable team player are a manager’s dream. People only need to be around an ISFJ for a short time to realize how pleasant and quietly gracious they are. Because their mission and desire is to serve, one of their great treats is to see someone they have helped succeed as a result of their benevolence. However, ISFJs can become so wrapped up in serving others that they are quickly taken for granted. And if they aren’t careful with their own energy, they can work themselves to exhaustion.

ISFJs’ Workplace Stressors

ISFJs often set few or no limits for how long they will work on a project or a program. Quietly working long hours and going above and beyond the call of duty, they are easily susceptible to long-term stress or burnout.

Other types, especially Extraverted-iNtuitives (ENs), can become impatient with ISFJs in two areas. One is the slow, deliberate, methodical (some call it boring) way in which they approach specific tasks. Types who are more prone to seat-of-the-pants flamboyance find the ISFJ’s quiet, self-effacing dependability irritating at best. Equally troubling to others is the way that ISFJs let people take advantage of them. In fact, it is the ISFJ’s high sense of duty that keeps them so committed. Interestingly, those who have a low tolerance for such blind loyalty may be very willing to take advantage of the ISFJ’s generosity; they only become impatient that the ISFJ allows it to happen. Like other Feeling (F) types, ISFJs do not cope well with conflict. So when office strife occurs they prefer to ignore it or bury it, hoping that it will soon disappear.

Although it takes a great deal to make ISFJs angry, when they do their reaction will probably be stubborn, unforgiving, and unbending. Often this is followed with a flurry of emotion that can include a laundry list of pent-up issues – about work, people, or anything else in range, regardless of whether it’s related to the current event. Once that happens, there is little chance for recovery and the response is totally disproportionate to the situation. In spite of their desire to avoid conflict, ISFJs need to learn to share concerns as they arise; this will allow them to deal more effectively with problems when they occur.

Their sense of duty and obligation can also become a liability for ISFJs when carried to an extreme. They do themselves and others a service when they are more vocal and direct about their own needs. However difficult, this is absolutely necessary.

Another potential ISFJ stressor can be their inability to see the forest for the trees. They may get so caught up in an immediate service or need that they lose track of just about everything. Having attended to the crisis of the moment, they suddenly find themselves tired, drained, and quite irritable because there are still hours to go in the workday and they have spent all their energy.

In spite of these potential weaknesses, our institutions and organizations simply would not work as well without ISFJs. They serve as role models and an inspiration for much of what society deems good and noble. That, coupled with their tenacity, is why life happens so well for so many of us. We are fortunate that some ISFJ somewhere is loyally working behind the scenes, putting things together that we can use and enjoy.

ISFJs' Careers

Bound by fierce commitment, intense responsibility, and deep loyalty, ISFJs are the embodiment of putting service above self in almost everything. Unless you've experienced this type, it's hard to believe that someone can be so dedicated and dutiful in so many aspects of life. It is amazing how nobly they work behind the scenes, allowing many great things to happen while the glory goes to others. This is a direct result of the ISFJ's stringent personal sacrifice and dependability. These qualities make them a natural fit for careers in the nonprofit sector and other service-related jobs.

The quiet support and affirmation generally associated with ISFJs is a powerful asset in the workplace, regardless of the career they choose. To give credit where credit is due is expected and reasonable, but it is purely ISFJ to let others get credit for work they have largely done. If everyone benefits from what has been accomplished, and the workplace is better for it, that is reward enough for this ultimate team player.

Summary

ISFJs are adept at making sure everyone and everything is taken care of so others can succeed and accomplish their goals. As they strive to care for others they may work extremely long hours, often to the loss of their own health and well-being.

Adapted from the writing and teaching of Otto Kroeger and Janet M. Thuesen.

ISFJs On a Team

Naturally Bring to a Team

- Support and respect for others; their relationships are focused on caring about people
- Provide order, structure, attention to detail, and stability
- Kind and understanding, they focus on harmony and mutual support through teamwork and a sense of belonging
- Dedicated to making the team work smoothly
- Dependable record-keepers, focusing on facts and details

Teamwork Style

- Often lead reluctantly; they are conscientious, committed, and dedicated
- Expect others to follow rules and procedures without unnecessary and uncalled-for questions
- Caring, rules-oriented, and quiet; they have a nonthreatening, encouraging, open style
- Respectful of others' experiences and talents

Potential Blind Spots

- In an effort to satisfy everyone, may have a hard time sticking up for themselves and being assertive
- Tend to be seen as slow, overly methodical decision makers
- Have little tolerance for ambiguity
- Often seen as serious and concerned; may over-prepare for the worst

To Help Them Succeed

- Avoid overloading them to the point of causing stress
- Give positive feedback and acknowledgement
- Provide time alone for reflection and planning
- Help them see the positives in change

Adapted from Quick Guide to the 16 Personality Types in Organizations by Sue A. Cooper, Roger R. Pearman, et al.

Managing the ISFJ

WORK LABEL – PROTECTOR

- Quiet and conscientious
- Loyal and devoted worker
- Sympathetic listener
- Very dependable
- Team player

STRENGTHS

- Considerate
- Responsible
- Patient
- Dedicated
- Realistic

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

- Take the initiative more often
- Take care of personal needs
- Be open to the big picture
- Seek out objective viewpoints
- Recognize the value of conflict

TO FUNCTION BEST An orderly work environment with human interaction.
ISFJs NEED: Opportunities to respond to the needs of others. Harmonious relationships. Praise and appreciation.

ISFJs ARE FRUSTRATED BY: Criticism and injustice. Having to stop in the middle of a project. Too much complexity and cold, impersonal logic.

ISFJs IRRITATE OTHERS BY: Becoming subjective and overly sensitive to criticism. Not speaking up about unpleasant things that need to be aired.

ISFJs VALUE: Relationships, responsibility, and harmony.

ON A TEAM: They care and do the work.