

SMART NEWS

# Has the Pandemic Changed Your Personality?

Research suggests younger adults' dispositions shifted the most during Covid-19



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Past research has found that people's personalities are relatively immune to changes following collective stressful events, but Covid-19 appears to be an exception. Justin Paget via Getty Images

American adults experienced about a decade's worth of personality change in just two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, a new study revealed.

The research, published Wednesday in the journal *PLOS ONE*, found declines in extroversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness among adults, with the most dramatic shifts displayed in people under 30.

Past research has found that personalities are relatively immune to changes following collective stressful events, such as natural disasters, but Covid-19 appears to be an exception, according to the study.

"We know that personality is pretty stable," Angelina Sutin, a psychologist at Florida State University and the study's lead author, tells *Fortune's* Alexa Mikhail. "It can and does change, but not that much. With the pandemic, it was really an unprecedented opportunity to look at how this collected stressor had an effect on personality."

Still, the study had a few drawbacks, says Brent Roberts, a psychologist at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who wasn't part of the research, to *CNN's* Madeline Holcombe. There was no control group of people who hadn't experienced the pandemic, and other explanations weren't explored, making it hard to assess if these personality changes were directly caused by Covid-19, he tells the publication.

The researchers analyzed data from 7,109 adults in the United States, based on the Big Five personality traits: neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. The participants, aged 18 to 109, took multiple personality tests measuring these traits before and during the pandemic, according to the study.

In the first, "acute" phase of Covid-19, defined by the researchers as the period from March 2020 to December 2020, personality traits remained fairly consistent with pre-pandemic surveys, with only neuroticism slightly declining.

By the second phase of the pandemic, defined as the "adaptation" period from January 2021 to February 2022, there were no overall shifts in neuroticism relative to pre-pandemic levels—but adults had become less extroverted, open, agreeable and conscientious, according to the study.

Younger adults' personalities changed the most, while the oldest group of participants had no significant shifts in their personality traits, according to the study.

"The older you get, the more of a sense of identity you have, the more entrenched you are in your social roles," Rodica Damian, a psychologist at the University of

Houston, who wasn't involved in the research, tells *NBC's* Aria Bendix. "You know more who you are, so things are going to affect you less in some ways."

The most dramatic personality changes usually happen among adults aged 18 to 25, since that's when people tend to take on new roles and transition into college or the workforce, Damian says to *NBC*.

Though no other age group saw an increase in neuroticism in the second phase of the pandemic, adults under 30 did. The findings dramatically highlight the pandemic's impact on the mental health of younger adults, reports *Fortune*.

"The increased neuroticism and decreased conscientiousness would mean that this cohort would be more vulnerable to mental and physical health problems," Roberts says to *CNN*. "Although, given the modest effect sizes, these effects would be too subtle to see at the level of an individual and would more likely only be seen in aggregate, population-level analyses such as those done by epidemiologists."

In addition to Covid-19's emotional impact, the effect of systemic racism throughout the pandemic and the global protests in response might also be displayed in how personality traits have shifted, Sutin tells *Fortune*.

Although personality doesn't directly control mental health, Sutin is advocating for more research into the impacts that pandemic-related personality changes may have on well-being, particularly for young adults, *Fortune* reports.

"We need to do what we can to help support younger adults as much as possible, so they can make better transitions into adulthood and reduce the stress that they face to help improve their mental health and long-term outcomes," Sutin tells the publication.