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Pandemic stress may have had a lasting impact on our personalities

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The global coronavirus pandemic disrupted almost everything about our lives, from how we work and go to school, to how we socialize (Zoom happy hours, anyone?!), and ultimately strained trust in many of the overarching systems we depend on, from health care to government.

New research suggests it may have changed Americans' personalities, too, and not for the better.

Typically, major personality traits remain fairly stable throughout life, with most change happening in young adulthood or when stressful personal life events occur. It's rare to see population-wide personality shifts, even after stressful events, but in a new study in the journal PLOS One, psychologists found just that in the wake of the pandemic.

The researchers had previously found a small, counterintuitive change in personality early in the pandemic: They found a decrease in neuroticism, the personality trait associated with stress and negative emotions. In the current study, they were curious if they would find different personality changes in the second and third year of the pandemic.

"And we did. There was a completely different pattern of change," says study author Angelina Sutin, an assistant professor of behavioral sciences and social medicine at the Florida State University College of Medicine.



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Personality Can Change Over A Lifetime, And Usually For The Better

In the later period of the pandemic, the researchers noted significant declines in the traits that help us navigate social situations, trust others, think creatively, and act responsibly. These changes were especially pronounced among young adults.

Sutin hypothesizes that personality traits may have changed as public sentiment about the pandemic shifted. "The first year [of the pandemic] there was this real coming together," Sutin says. "But in the second year, with all of that support falling away and

then the open hostility and social upheaval around restrictions ... all the collective good will that we had, we lost, and that might have been very significant for personality."

Maturity interrupted?

To measure the changes, Sutin and her team analyzed surveys from three time periods: once pre-pandemic, before March 2020, once in the early lockdown period in 2020, and once either in 2021 or 2022. All the responses came from the longitudinal Understanding America Study, organized by University of Southern California.

The surveys gathered results from a widely-accepted model for studying personality, the Big Five Inventory, that measures five different dimensions of personality: neuroticism (stress), extroversion (connecting with others), openness (creative thinking), agreeableness (being trusting), and conscientiousness (being organized, disciplined and responsible).



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While these traits don't typically change radically throughout a lifetime, there's a general trend for young people to see a decrease in neuroticism as they mature, and an increase in agreeableness and conscientiousness. Sutin calls this trajectory "development towards maturity." But the study findings suggest a reversal of that pattern for younger adults as the pandemic dragged on.

Between the first stages of pandemic lockdown in 2020 to the second and third years of the pandemic in 2021 and 2022, the researchers found that extroversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness all declined across the population, but especially for younger adults, who also showed an *increase* in neuroticism.

Joshua Jackson, an associate professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis, who studies the factors responsible for personality change and was not involved in this study, says that finding was significant.

"Younger individuals have less resources, they're less established in their social context, in their jobs and friends," he says. "So any sort of disruption, they're the ones that are going to have this fewer number of resources to ride out the storm."

Sutin notes that even in more normal times, young adults are more likely to see change in their personality. But in the pandemic, "all the normal things that younger adults are supposed to do were disrupted: school, socializing, work." Although older adults were at greater risk from the virus, their lives were "in a much more stable place in general," Sutin says.

These particular personality changes in young people have the potential for negative long-term impacts, too, says Jackson. "[Agreeableness and conscientiousness] are characteristics that are associated with success in the workforce, and in relationships," he says.

The study authors concur, writing that high conscientiousness is associated with higher educational achievement and income and lower risk of chronic diseases. Neuroticism is linked with risky health behaviors and poor mental health.

Long-term personality change or 'short-term shock'

The personality changes documented were not huge, but they were equal to the typical amount of personality change normally found in a decade of life, and they were seen across race and education level.

Jackson says the fact that the findings were seen across the population point to just how unprecedented the pandemic has been.

"The general rule is that life events don't have widespread impact on personality," he says. For that reason, Jackson hopes further study will determine whether the personality changes this study found will sustain over a lifetime or be more of a "short-term shock."

It's worth noting that the changes are relatively modest in scope, says Brent Roberts, a professor of psychology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who studies

continuity and change in personality across adulthood, and was also not involved in the study.

With a personality shift across population in these areas, "there's going to be a slight elevation of some of the negative outcomes ... predominantly related to mental health and health," Roberts says.

And though the findings are significant at a population level, they're probably not reason for any individual alarm. So before you go blaming your bad mood on the pandemic, remember that personalities are typically resilient long-term.

"It's not a simple question of either people being fixed and not changing at all, which is clearly wrong, or being rudderless ships battered about by the winds of change — it's something in between," says Roberts. Overall, the environmental changes we've experienced over the past few years aren't likely permanent either, which means the psychological consequences might very well change again, too.

The study had some limitations. For one thing, it didn't have a control group to compare results — there wasn't a group of people who didn't live through the pandemic for comparison in this case. And Roberts says it's hard to tease out what, exactly, over the past few years had the biggest impact on these shifts in personality.

The COVID crisis could have been the main driver of personality change, but other societal changes or reckonings we experienced in the same time frame — the mass shift to virtual school and work, increased economic stratification, the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, or the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance.

Or it could be related to economic stress and "long-term disparities that are occurring in our society," Roberts says.

"It's been pretty clear from a lot of surveys, especially the younger folks feel a lot less hope for their future economic viability. ... And if that's the case, then, there's your alternative for why you see this subtle decrease in these kinds of personality traits that are often related to feeling connected to and effective in society."

And perhaps the findings are the result of more than one thing at the same time. The other group that showed significant personality trait change, for instance, were Hispanic/Latino respondents, who, Sutin points out, bore the brunt of the pandemic in more ways than one, "both in terms of being more vulnerable to the illness and the more severe consequences of also being on the front lines [as essential workers]."

Either, or both, of which might have taken a toll on personality in the population.

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