

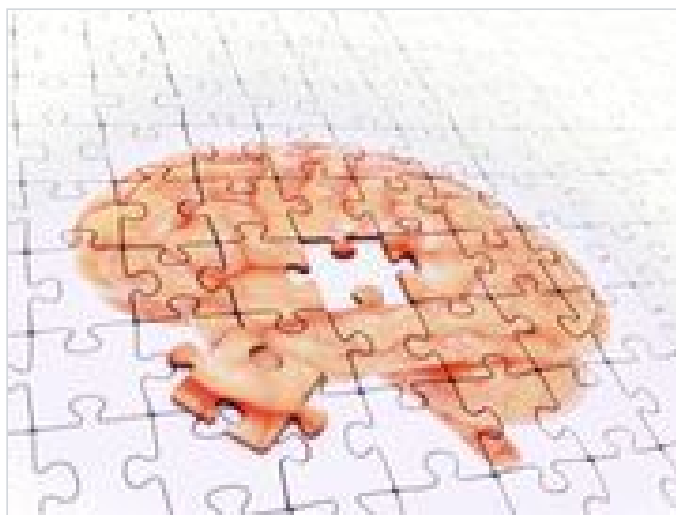
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Your Personality May Safeguard Your Aging Brain

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By Amy Norton HealthDay Reporter



(HEALTHDAY)

TUESDAY, April 12, 2022 (HealthDay News) -- Certain personality traits may make older adults more or less vulnerable to waning memory and thinking skills, a new study suggests.

The study, of nearly 2,000 older adults, found that those high on the "conscientious" scale — organized, self-disciplined and productive — were less likely to develop mild cognitive impairment. That refers to subtler problems with memory and other mental skills that sometimes precede dementia.

On the other end of the spectrum were older folks high in neuroticism — a tendency to be anxious, moody and vulnerable to stress. They had an increased risk of developing mild cognitive impairment, versus people low on the neuroticism scale.

The findings, published April 11 in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), add to evidence linking personality to cognitive health as we age.

Personality matters, experts said, because it influences health-related choices ranging from exercise to smoking, as well as broader attitudes — including whether you believe you can make positive changes.

"Personality traits reflect an individual's persistent patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving," said Tomiko Yoneda, a postdoctoral researcher at Northwestern University in Chicago, who led the study.

People who are high in conscientiousness, for example, are inclined to eat well, exercise and engage in other [healthy behaviors](#), while avoiding risks like smoking.

Those tendencies may explain their lower risk of developing [mild cognitive impairment](#), according to Yoneda, who was based at the University of Victoria, in Canada, at the time of the study.

In contrast, she said, people high on the neuroticism scale often have "unhealthy coping styles" to deal with anxiety, depression and emotional instability.

Angelina Sutin is a professor at Florida State University College of Medicine who studies personality traits and health.

Sutin agreed that lifestyle behaviors, over the course of a lifetime, are likely a major reason that personality traits are associated with older adults' memory and thinking skills.

But it goes beyond things like diet, exercise and smoking, too, Sutin said. Personality influences a person's likelihood of exploring new experiences, for example, or being socially active. Both mental and social stimulation are thought to support healthy brain aging.

There is also evidence linking personality traits to the likelihood of having [chronic low-level inflammation](#) in the body — a state that can contribute to a range of diseases.

But lest anxious people get anxious about developing cognitive impairment, Sutin stressed that personality is not "destiny."

Cognitive decline and dementia are complex, with many factors coming into play. And while personality tends to be relatively stable throughout life, it is not set in stone, either.

Both Sutin and Yoneda pointed to research showing that personality can be nudged in a positive direction when people make concerted efforts to notice and alter certain habitual thoughts and behaviors.

People high in neuroticism, for example, can improve their emotional stability, while dedicated introverts can come out of their shells a bit to be more socially engaged.

"You won't radically change who you are," Sutin said. Instead, she added, it's about making achievable shifts: People high on the neuroticism scale, for instance, could decide to be a little more organized in their daily routines.

The current findings are based on 1,954 older adults who were part of a long-term study of memory and aging that began in the 1990s. Participants answered standard questions gauging personality traits, and then had annual assessments of their cognitive skills, for up to 23 years.

Overall, Yoneda's team found, the odds of developing mild impairment declined 22% for each 6-point increase on the conscientiousness scale (which ranges from 0 to 48). In contrast, that risk rose by 12% with every 7-point jump on the neuroticism scale (also 0 to 48).

In a related finding, highly conscientious seniors also lived longer in good cognitive health: An 80-year-old, for example, could expect to live an extra two years without impairment, versus a peer who was low on the conscientiousness scale.

Again, though, Sutin stressed that people do not have to be ruled by their personalities.

Instead, she said, understanding your own personality, and how it motivates your thinking and behavior, is helpful: You may be able to "take a step back" when a stressful situation arises, and choose a better coping strategy.

More information

The Alzheimer's Association has advice on [supporting brain health](#).

SOURCES: Tomiko Yoneda, PhD, postdoctoral researcher, medical social sciences, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago; Angelina Sutin, PhD,

professor, behavioral sciences and social medicine, Florida State University College of Medicine, Tallahassee, Fla.; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, April 11, 2022, online

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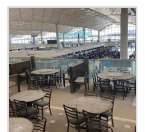
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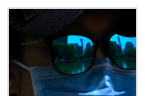
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