

Study suggests people with neurotic personality traits do not enjoy growing older as much as peers, may need extra help

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While most adult Americans report feeling more cheerful, content and other positive emotions as they reach their middle and later years, a subset who have more neurotic personality traits do not share in that trend toward greater satisfaction with age, according to a recent analysis by psychology researchers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Purdue University.

Led by Rebecca Ready, UMass Amherst assistant professor of psychology, and her [graduate student](#) Anna Akerstedt, with Daniel Mroczek at Purdue, the analysis suggests that neuroticism may be a liability for older adults not only because they are less content but because their "negative affect" is associated with poorer mental health.

The researchers suggest that psychological theories about emotional change over time and clinical practice could do more to help enrich adults' lives by taking into account individual personality differences such as neuroticism. Results appear in the current issue of the journal *Aging and [Mental Health](#)*.

Ready and colleagues analyzed data collected at two points about 10 years apart from 1,503 men and women who participated in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS I and II) studies. "People who score high on a neuroticism scale had less mental well-being over time and this pattern was stronger for older and midlife adults than for younger

persons. We feel further study may yield a better understanding of how to intervene in this process. This might provide tools to guard against late-life depressive symptoms," Ready says.

Psychology views neuroticism as a fairly stable personality trait that occurs on a continuum. People who score higher describe themselves more often as nervous, sad, upset and feeling hopeless or worthless. By contrast, people who score low in neuroticism report less often feeling tense, sad or worried. They don't say they are happier, but they do say they feel calm, satisfied and not stressed.

Ready and her colleagues point out that despite the wealth of data available on neuroticism, emotion and aging, little is known about how these variables interact over time, as people grow older. They set out to address this gap in understanding and to explore whether an individual's neuroticism score at baseline predicted emotional complexity and emotional well-being 10 years later.

Participants were selected from among 2,257 people 25 to 74 years old who took part in the MIDUS I study in 1995-1996 as well as the follow-up study in 2004-2006. Respondents completed two mail-in questionnaires and a 30-minute phone interview at each time point. Those with missing data or who didn't answer the questions needed for this analysis were excluded, leaving 1,503 in the final sample. They were 90 percent white, 55 percent female and most, 68.7 percent, were married at baseline.

The researchers assessed the trait of neuroticism with a four-item scale at MIDUS I and II. It asked how often subjects felt moody, worried or nervous, for example. Ten years later, different items were used to code individuals as having positive or negative emotions by asking how often they felt sad, restless/fidgety, hopeless, everything was an effort, worthless, afraid, jittery, irritable, ashamed and upset as well as

attentive, proud and active.

Overall, using moderated multiple regressions, Ready and colleagues found that neuroticism was significantly and negatively associated with emotional well-being while age was significantly and positively associated with emotional well-being. The interaction between age and neuroticism in predicting emotional well-being was significant.

A major finding was that "neuroticism is more strongly linked to emotion outcomes for older than younger persons," they add. On average, neuroticism tends to decrease during adult development, but not at the same rate for everyone, Ready points out. "Such decreases may result in better, broader and richer emotional experiences in later life. This hypothesis is supported by results of the current study."

Older and midlife adults who are as high on the neuroticism scale as younger people might be helped by early interventions to improve emotional well-being, Ready adds. "We did not assess risk for future depressive disorders but it is reasonable to speculate that older and midlife adults high in neuroticism are at greater risk for depressive symptoms in the future than are persons lower in neuroticism. They may also experience less well-being and may have less tolerance for complex emotions."

The authors say more research is needed to explore how and why some [older adults](#) do not conform to normative developmental trajectories to provide a fuller understanding of [emotional](#) development and how to help people achieve optimal outcomes as they mature.

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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