

Neurotics don't just avoid action: They dislike it

April 22 2014, by Joseph J. Diorio



Neurotic individuals avoid and dislike action. Credit: University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School for Communication.

That person we all seem to know who we say is neurotic and unable to take action? Turns out he or she isn't unable to act but simply doesn't want to.

A study of nearly 4,000 college students in 19 countries has uncovered new details about why neurotic people may avoid making decisions and moving forward with life. Turns out that when they are asked if action is

positive, favorable, good, they just don't like it as much as non-neurotics. Therefore persuasive communications and other interventions may be useful if they simply alter neurotics' attitudes toward inaction.

These findings come from the study "Neuroticism and Attitudes Toward Action in 19 Countries." It is published in the *Journal of Personality* and was written by Molly E. Ireland, Texas Tech University; Justin Hepler, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Hong Li, Battelle Center for Analytics and Public Health; and Dolores Albarracín –the principal investigator of the study— from the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania.

"You're so neurotic!" It's a phrase that's tossed about casually, but what exactly is [neuroticism](#)? It is a personality trait defined by the experience of chronic negative affect – including sadness, anxiety, irritability, and self-consciousness – that is easily triggered and difficult to control. Neurotic people tend to avoid acting when confronted with major and minor life stressors, leading to negative life consequences.

The researchers sought to determine whether and under what conditions neuroticism is associated with favorable or unfavorable representations of action and inaction. They investigated whether depression and anxiety would decrease proactive behavior among neurotic individuals, and whether a person's collectivistic tendencies – considering the social consequences of one's behavior before acting – would moderate the negative associations between neuroticism and action/inaction. The study found neurotics look at action less favorably and inaction more favorably than emotionally stable people do.

"People who are less emotionally stable have less [positive attitudes](#) towards action and more positive attitudes toward inaction," the authors wrote. "Furthermore, anxiety was primarily responsible for [neurotic individuals](#)' less positive attitudes toward action. The link between

neuroticism and less positive attitudes toward action was strongest among individuals who endorsed more collectivistic than individualistic beliefs." So, your neurotic friend who explicitly dislikes action is probably collectivistic –favoring social harmony, family and friends.

"People who are interested in reducing the harmful consequences of neuroticism in their own lives should think about how their attitudes toward action might be affecting their behavior. By learning to value action, they may be able to change many of the negative behaviors associated with neuroticism and anxiety – such as freezing when they should act, or withdrawing from stress instead of dealing proactively with it," the authors concluded, suggesting that attitudes about action and inaction goals have broad consequences for behavior across diverse contexts and cultures. "These findings lay the groundwork for finding new methods of studying and ultimately preventing the negative consequence of neurotic action avoidance. Specifically, increasing exposure to action may be sufficient to combat tendencies to avoid proactive behavior."

This is a continuation of a study on attitudes. A study [published](#) last year of population in the same countries looked at action-inaction balance in cultural values.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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