

Teen personality traits linked to risk of death from any cause 50 years later

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Personality traits evident as early as the teenage years may be linked to a

heightened or lessened risk of death around 50 years later, suggests observational research of 'baby boomers,' published online in the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*.

Energy, calmness, empathy, maturity and intellectual curiosity may be protective, while impulsivity may harm the chances of longevity, the findings indicate.

Previous research suggests that [personality](#) traits in mid-life may predict the probability of dying earlier or later. But it's not clear if the potential seeds of this association might go back even further, as has already been suggested for IQ and family background.

To explore this further, the researchers drew on data compiled for the Project Talent Study, a nationally representative sample of 5 per cent (1226) of all US high (secondary) schools in 1960.

Some 377,016 pupils, mostly ranging in age from 13 (9th grade) to 18 (12th grade) completed a battery of psychological tests and questionnaires over two days at that time.

The information sought, included family background-parents' educational attainment and job titles, income, housing and property ownership-as well as 10 personality traits, measured by the Project Talent Personality Inventory (PTPI), and considered important for lifetime success.

These were calmness; [social sensitivity](#) (empathy and sensitivity to other people's feelings); impulsivity; leadership (responsibility and self-determination); vigour (energetic disposition); self-confidence; tidiness (preference for organisation and order); sociability (outgoing disposition); culture (intellectual curiosity); and mature personality (goal-oriented).

These traits have subsequently been mapped to the current 'Big 5' dimensions used to describe personality: agreeableness; extraversion; conscientiousness; openness; and neuroticism.

The final [analysis](#) included 26,845 participants from 1171 of the original schools for whom there were complete data and whose records were tracked through the National Death Index up to 2009.

During the monitoring period, which averaged nearly 48 years, just over 13 per cent of the participants died.

The analysis revealed that a higher score for energy, empathy, [calmness](#), tidiness, intellectual curiosity and maturity, and a lower score for impulsivity, as a teen were associated with a lower relative risk of death from any cause over the subsequent half century.

Factoring in ethnicity and [family background](#) did little to alter the observed associations between [personality traits](#) and survival.

And when all potentially influential factors were accounted for, the analysis showed that every 1-point change (from the expected average) in personality [trait](#) score was associated with increases or decreases of 5 to 7 per cent in the relative risk of death over the average 48-year monitoring period.

This is an observational study, and as such, can't establish cause, added to which not all the sample was randomly selected nor were ethnicity data available for all the participants. And the researchers didn't look at specific causes of death.

Nevertheless, the findings are based on large numbers, nearly half a century of monitoring, and an extensive personality trait inventory, say the researchers.

"In one sense, the tracing of personality-mortality associations back to adolescence is surprising because the high school years are widely seen as a time of personality development and malleability," they comment.

And they acknowledge: "Personality change over the life course is a complex issue, with considerable individual variability."

But they suggest that the possible ways in which personality may be linked longevity include the adoption of unhealthy behaviours and the long term physiological impact of psychological factors on the body's immune, hormonal, and cardiovascular systems.

"Maladaptive traits also appear to limit later educational attainment, impede mid-life occupational advancement and increase risk of divorce-social and socioeconomic factors linked to later death," they point out.

More information: *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, DOI: [10.1136/jech-2018-211076](https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2018-211076)

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