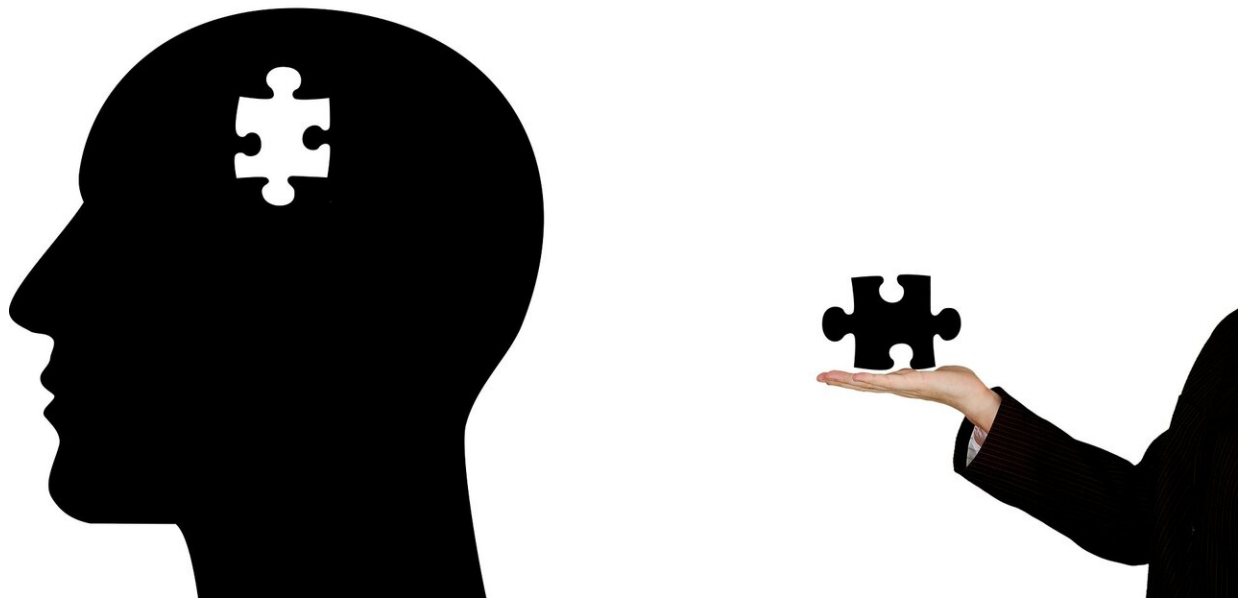


Effective anxiety therapy changes personality

February 25 2021, by Steinar Brandslet



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Previous research from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) has shown that people with anxiety disorders can benefit from two types of therapy. But in a new NTNU study, the same patients also exhibited major changes on a scientific personality test.

The treatment resulted in patients scoring lower on the neuroticism personality trait, and thereby perhaps having a lower risk of relapse. In

general, the patients' personality profiles also normalized.

"Our findings might apply to treatment in general. The risk of relapse could be less if we manage to reduce patients' neuroticism," says Professor Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

Two effective methods

People with generalized anxiety disorder usually score high on neuroticism. At the same time, they score lower on the traits of extroversion and openness to new experiences.

The research team used both cognitive behavior therapy and metacognitive therapy to help patients.

Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) aims to help patients identify and change destructive and disruptive thought patterns and practice relaxation.

Metacognitive therapy is a new treatment method that rather than changing the content of worry cognition, attempts to change the patients metacognitions about worry and discontinue the worry process.

Both have positive effects for patients.

Such dramatic effects unusual

The [personality changes](#) found by the research group in this study were more than twice as great as those reported in previous research. Both treatment methods produced greater changes in neuroticism than previously reported in studies of changes in neuroticism traits after

treatment.

"It's unusual to find such dramatic changes in personality following treatment," Kennair says.

Previous research has not shown that different treatment methods result in different degrees of personality change. This may be due in part to the methods used. In this study, MCT had the greatest effect on both symptoms and personality.

"The more effective the treatment method, the greater the personality changes, so the most effective methods are likely to yield the biggest personality changes," Kennair says.

In particular, they sought out social situations more and became more warm, friendly and interested in others. They were also more open to new experiences and activities.

The treatment for generalized anxiety disorder not only alleviated the neurotic traits, but also led to the patient's personality in general becoming more normal and stable.

Patients became more extroverted after treatment. In particular, they sought out social situations more and became more warm, friendly and interested in others. They were also more open to new experiences and activities.

"Both methods seem to work equally well to alleviate the neurotic traits, but metacognitive therapy seems to provide the greatest personality change," says Kennair.

Trait psychology usually looks less at personality

change

"Modern personality psychology focuses more on normal variations in personality and on personality stability than older methods do," Kennair explains.

To measure changes in personality, the research group used the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI), which is considered by many professionals to be the best measure of personality.

NEO-PI measures the five personality traits in the Five Factor Model: openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extroversion and neuroticism. Using such a measure is unusual in a context where the goal is to find effective treatment.

Modern personality psychology assumes to a greater extent that personality traits are relatively stable. The goal of clinical treatment is to change certain personality traits. The study stands out in that it uses good, scientific measures of personality traits to enable the researchers to identify personality changes.

60 patients examined

Sixty patients were divided into two randomized groups, with one group receiving cognitive behavior therapy and the other receiving metacognitive [therapy](#).

The treatment study for generalized anxiety disorder was previously published by Nordahl et al (2019), and the effect on personality traits was published this time around. The treatment lasted for only twelve sessions.

"The results show that patients may not need to go through long-term psychotherapy to change their personality structure," says Kennair.

The research group believes new studies should include personality measures to investigate the significance of [personality](#) change in relation to the effectiveness of treatment.

More information: Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair et al, Change in personality traits and facets (Revised NEO Personality Inventory) following metacognitive therapy or cognitive behaviour therapy for generalized anxiety disorder: Results from a randomized controlled trial, *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/cpp.2541](https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2541)

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Citation: Effective anxiety therapy changes personality (2021, February 25) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-effective-anxiety-therapy-personality.html>

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