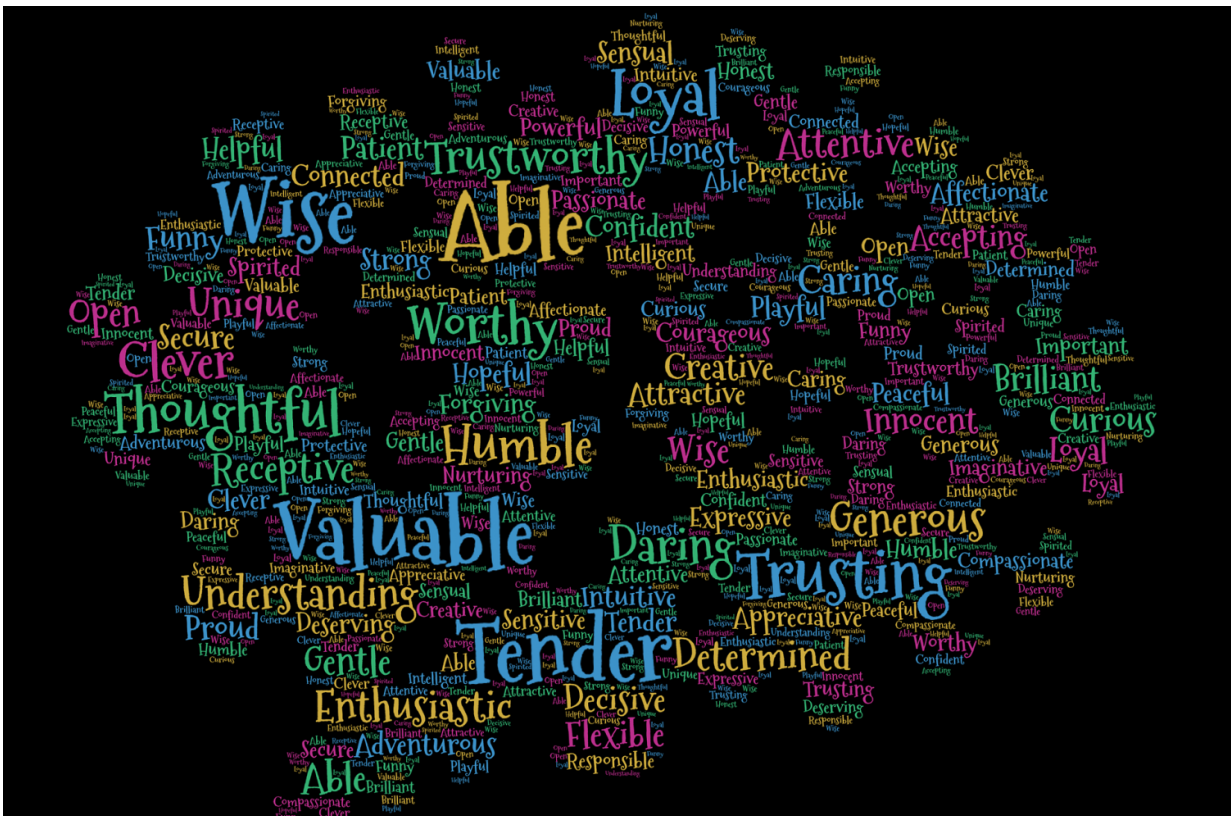


Which personality traits can be improved without personal motivation? Research says 'it depends'

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Could a company train an employee to become more conscientious, even if the worker isn't invested in improving that trait? A new study suggests

yes.

But improving someone's [emotional stability](#) without that person's commitment is not likely to happen, says SMU psychology professor Nathan Hudson.

A growing body of studies suggests that [personality](#) traits can be changed through [intervention](#). As a recent study by Hudson notes, personality traits are linked to a wide range of life outcomes, such as relationship quality and occupation success.

The goal of his recent research published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* was to test two theories; that successful personality intervention may require that participants chose which traits they change, and that they be actively invested in changing the target traits.

He found that conscientiousness—the ability to be responsible, hard-working and organized—could be improved even if participants were not motivated to change. Completing a series of tasks over a regulated period was found to change habits and therefore improve conscientiousness.

But emotional [stability](#) was a different matter: Study participants only got better at handling difficult situations if they chose to work on their emotional stability. Otherwise, tasks they were given over four weeks proved to be ineffective.

"This provides promising evidence that schools, companies, or other organizations could ask people to make relatively minor changes that could help improve their lives by making them more organized and responsible over time," Hudson said. "In contrast, it appears that emotional stability might require a bit more investment from the people who partake in an intervention."

Hudson stressed that this research isn't about trying to control people.

"The idea of personality trait change—especially other people trying to change an individual's personality—can sound scary. But whether we recognize it or not, society is filled with interventions designed to try to change our personality traits," he said. "For instance, elementary school is a giant intervention designed to help children become more intelligent, yes, but also kinder and more sociable, responsible and hardworking."

Previous research by Hudson and other psychologists has shown that people who actively worked to change aspects of their personality were, in many cases, successful in achieving the results they desired.

But before now, it wasn't clear if a person could have successful results if they didn't choose which personality trait they were looking to change and weren't invested in making that change.

How this study was done

Hudson conducted two separate studies to answer that question. Each lasted four months.

In the first, 175 [college students](#) were randomly assigned to change either conscientiousness or emotional stability. They were then given their choice of tasks to improve that personality trait. For instance, those who were selected to work on being more conscientious were given challenges like "organize and clean your desks" or "make a list of tasks you would like to complete."

The second trial had more than 400 college students at several universities choose which trait they wanted to work on. Yet, unbeknownst to them, half of the participants were randomly assigned to receive challenges targeting a characteristic that they didn't choose.

In both studies, the students' [personality traits](#) were measured before and after tasks were assigned using the 44-item Big Five Inventory test that is standard among psychologists.

Hudson found that students who completed more tasks for conscientiousness-building tasks saw an improvement, even when they were not aware why they were assigned the tasks. But for those who did not choose to work on emotional stability, the challenges were entirely inert—or even made that trait worse.

Why is emotional stability different from conscientiousness?

Hudson suspects that the reason people must be motivated to change emotional stability is that this trait deals with negative emotions.

"For many people, it can be difficult to 'just stop feeling angry' or 'just stop being stressed,'" he said. "My hunch is that indirect strategies for changing someone's emotions, such as writing in a journal or thinking about positive things, can only really work when people want to use those techniques to change their emotions."

Conscientiousness, on the other hand, can be easily faked and increased over time through mechanical acts, like cleaning your room or using a calendar.

"Motivation is largely irrelevant to interventions targeting conscientiousness, as long as participants adhere to the intervention," Hudson said.

More information: Nathan W. Hudson, Does successfully changing personality traits via intervention require that participants be

autonomously motivated to change?, *Journal of Research in Personality* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrp.2021.104160](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2021.104160)

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