

agreeable also effectively reduce a trio of negative [personality traits](#) known as the "Dark Triad"—Machiavellianism, [narcissism](#), and psychopathy.

SMU psychology professor Nathan Hudson's study showed that practicing activities like "donating money to a charity that you would normally spend on yourself" or "talking to a stranger and asking them about themselves" decreased all three Dark Triad traits after four months. That was the case even for people who said they wanted to increase their dark traits, not diminish them.

In a surprise twist, though, Hudson's study published in the *Journal of Personality* found that these people did want to become more agreeable—modest, kind, considerate and helpful.

"Thus, interventions targeting agreeableness may be an effective way to help reduce dark traits in a way that people may be likely to cooperate with," he said.

How does Hudson account for the finding?

"I'd guess that people with high levels of Machiavellianism, for example, do want to be nice, kind people. But they also feel that manipulating others is a good and useful strategy for navigating life and getting what they want."

And perhaps there's a mental disconnect for people with high levels of the Dark Triad.

"No one wants to see themselves as bad or evil. So people tend to justify their [bad behavior](#)," he said.

The Dark Triad has been associated with a slew of behavioral hazards,

including academic cheating, increased criminal activity, increased violence with intimate partners and negative workplace behavior such as reduced productivity and impaired professional relationships.

Faking it until you make it

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. He has helped create a list of challenges that people can take to change one of the Big Five personality traits—extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability.

But he was curious if completing those tasks might also have unintended effects on other traits as well. So in this most recent study, Hudson examined whether changing any of the Big Five traits would reduce Machiavellianism, narcissism or psychopathy.

The study demonstrates that only activities targeting agreeableness were shown to reduce all three Dark Triad traits—above and beyond any changes in agreeableness.

For the study, Hudson had over 460 students with an average age of 20 rate their desires to change the Big Five and Dark Triad personality traits. They were given tasks to address the change(s) they wanted to make.

The students were also asked a series of questions to assess how strong those traits were after every week of the four-month study.

It should be noted that the people in the study weren't actually clinically tested for any of Dark Triad traits. Instead, they were classified through their responses to a survey based on the 27-item Short [Dark Triad scale](#).

Most of the people who ranked higher on having Dark Triad traits said they did not want to change narcissism or psychopathy. Hudson found most wanted to increase Machiavellianism—characterized by manipulation and exploitation of others, a cynical disregard for morality, and a focus on self-interest and deception.

Narcissistic people are known for their grandiosity, pride and a lack of empathy, while [psychopathy](#) is characterized by impulsivity, selfishness, remorselessness and enduring antisocial behavior.

Why wouldn't anyone with these traits want to change?

"This finding makes some inherent sense in that these dark traits generally deal with having an overinflated view of oneself and being okay with hurting or using other people for one's own benefit," Hudson said. "People high in such traits may view their high self-views or willingness to use others as an asset that helps them attain goals, as opposed to being a liability."

Yet, Hudson made another unexpected finding that supports the overall perception that people skilled in manipulation seek better tools to hone that behavior: Those who scored high in any of the Dark Triad traits were still likely to indicate that they wanted an intervention to increase agreeableness.

More information: Nathan W. Hudson, Lighten the darkness: Personality interventions targeting agreeableness also reduce participants' levels of the dark triad, *Journal of Personality* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12714](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12714)

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