

# Paper: Neurotic personality trait a key risk factor for stress perception

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A new paper co-written by a team of University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign experts who study the science of personalities points to the important role of personality traits to account for individual differences in experiencing stress.

In a [meta-analysis](#) synthesizing more than 1,500 effect sizes from about

300 primary studies, the team showed that while all of the "Big Five" [personality traits](#)—agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, [neuroticism](#) and openness—are related to experiencing [stress](#), neuroticism showed the strongest link, said Bo Zhang, a professor of labor and employment relations and of psychology at Illinois and a co-author of the paper.

"Stress is a significant mental and physical health issue that affects many people and many important domains of life, and some individuals are more likely to experience or perceive stress disproportionately or more intensely than others, which can then play a role in mental and physical health problems such as anxiety or depression," he said.

"We found that individuals high in neuroticism"—a heightened tendency toward [negative affect](#) as well as an exaggerated response to threat, frustration or loss—"demonstrated a relationship with both stressor exposure and perceived stress that was stronger than the other four personality traits."

Zhang's co-authors are Jing Luo, of the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University; former U. of I. graduate student Mengyang Cao; and Brent W. Roberts, a professor of psychology at the U. of I.

"The study is the first meta-analytic review that summarizes and integrates the assorted findings on the connections between the Big Five personality traits and stress," said Luo, the principal investigator of the research. "Our paper suggests that certain personality traits are an important source to understand [individual differences](#) in stress."

The researchers found that when stress assessed under different conceptualizations was tested, all of the Big Five traits were related to perceived stress—but only neuroticism, agreeableness and conscientiousness were related to stressor exposure.

"The other main personality factors have a link to stress, but it's not as pronounced as in someone who's neurotic," Zhang said.

"With agreeableness and conscientiousness, for example, it is possible that agreeable people are less likely to encounter [stressful situations](#) such as interpersonal conflict because of the tendency to be caring, understanding and forgiving. Similarly, conscientious people are less likely to experience stress because their good self-regulation abilities can protect them from the encounters of stressful experiences, as well as the negative psychological impacts of stressors."

But that's not the same way in which neuroticism affects stress, Zhang said.

"Neuroticism and stress share common components, so individuals high in neuroticism are likely to play an instrumental role in generating stressors and reacting to a wide variety of events in negative ways, leading to an increased likelihood or chronicity of negative experiences," he said.

The study underscores the importance of personality in better understanding individual differences in stress, the researchers said.

"Stress is omnipresent, and the findings in the current study may have implications for the investigation of individual differences in experiencing stress and the identification of individuals who are at high risk of suffering from stress and related health issues," Zhang said. "If we want to add some sort of intervention program to help people manage stress, we might need to take their specific [personality](#) profile into consideration, because there are individual differences in how people handle stress."

The paper was published by the journal *Personality and Social*

*Psychology Review.*

**More information:** Jing Luo et al, The Stressful Personality: A Meta-Analytical Review of the Relation Between Personality and Stress, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/10888683221104002](https://doi.org/10.1177/10888683221104002)

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