

Outgoing and structured people coped best with the pandemic, finds large study

February 22 2023, by Anne Sliper Midling



Does this scene bring back memories? This is what a birthday might have looked like during the pandemic—outdoors, with distancing and a limited cohort. Extroverts found creative ways to be social, which helped them maintain their mental health. Credit: Gudmund Sundlisæter

When we were all cooped up during the pandemic, the media heralded the fact that it was a time for introverts.

There were no parties you felt you had to attend. You concentrate on

work in a home office without colleagues to disturb you. There was home schooling. And any birthdays that could be celebrated were small and far between.

Now a large study shows that people among us who are extroverted and have structured lives, not the introverts, were the ones who coped best with the [pandemic](#).

Better mental health

"People who are extroverted and structured probably found creative ways to cope with [everyday life](#), which meant that they were able to maintain better [mental health](#) than many others," says Stian Solem, professor of psychology at NTNU.

He collaborated with psychology student Espen R. Lassen at NTNU and the research group behind the [national survey](#) TAKE.CARE2020 (Norwegian BRY.DEG2020) to investigate how different personality traits either helped people cope with the pandemic or made the situation worse.

The researchers also investigated how the factor called hardiness affected people's mental health.

More than five thousand Norwegians were asked how they were doing a few weeks after Norway closed down at the onset of the pandemic. Eight months later, they were asked the same questions.

Many studies during the pandemic have examined mental health, but the researchers at NTNU used personality traits as the basis for their analyses.

Foundation of our personality

In short, personality traits are the foundation of a person's personality. Personality traits are not thoughts and feelings, but are the basis for what a person thinks and feels.

The researchers applied the most common way of checking personality traits, which is to examine how a person scores on a continuum of the "Big Five" factors:

- extroversion
- agreeableness
- neuroticism
- openness
- conscientiousness

The main finding of the study was that individuals who were experiencing mental [health](#) difficulties at the beginning of the pandemic still had them almost nine months after the pandemic broke out.

"Neurotic people coped worst with the pandemic. This was what the researchers expected, based on other studies of [personality](#) traits and challenges. One piece of advice is to not spend too much time worrying and brooding," says Solem.

Over time, structured and extroverted people coped better with the pandemic than people who scored low on these [personality traits](#).

"A lot of people are really adaptable," says Lassen.

Minimize ruminating time

The researchers were not surprised that extroverts coped best with the pandemic.

"It's well known that people who are extroverted generally have easier access to [positive emotions](#) than people who are introverted. Extroverts generally have fewer psychological problems than introverts," says Solem.

Being structured also proved to be a quality that made the pandemic more liveable.

"People who score high on structure will generally make realistic plans, have the [self-discipline](#) to implement them and be able to create routines for satisfying everyday living. They probably put this quality to good use during the pandemic," says Solem.

So what should people do if they are prone to worry and the world presents great challenges?

"A good method is to minimize the time you spend ruminating. Spending a lot of time thinking and reflecting negatively about yourself and the future can be tough in the long run," says Lassen.

More information: Espen Rasmussen Lassen et al, Personality traits and hardiness as risk- and protective factors for mental distress during the COVID-19 pandemic: a Norwegian two-wave study, *BMC Psychiatry* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12888-022-04237-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-022-04237-y)

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