

How the pandemic made its mark on personality traits

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Major life changes can affect personality, and the COVID-19 pandemic was the rare big life event that all humans shared together.

"This was a really unique opportunity to see how a life event that's happening at the global stage to the entire population at the same time is

changing personality," said Emily Willroth, an assistant professor of psychological and [brain sciences](#) in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis.

Over the course of 21 months of the [pandemic](#), Willroth and colleagues surveyed 500 people with [diverse backgrounds](#), ages and from varied regions across the U.S. using the "Big 5" personality traits test that measures conscientiousness, [extraversion](#), agreeableness, neuroticism and openness.

What they found, published in [*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*](#), was that over the course of the pandemic, people became more conscientious, even more so in the later months of the pandemic. In addition, extraversion dropped, though it eventually stabilized, and people exhibited slightly less neuroticism, on average.

The increase in conscientiousness was not surprising considering "people really had to engage in conscientious behaviors," such as [hand washing](#) and distancing, and when people engage in behaviors repeatedly, it can lead to overall change in that broader trait, Willroth noted.

Extraversion, being outgoing and sociable, also declined for what would seem like obvious reasons, but Willroth pointed out that isolation isn't the only factor in becoming less extraverted.

Extraversion and "good feelings" go hand in hand, so the stresses of the pandemic also could be a factor in muting an outgoing attitude. In other words, people were not only being forced to isolate, but they also were experiencing fewer positive emotions, which also can decrease extraversion.

The decrease in neuroticism happened later in the pandemic and may have occurred because people began to adapt to the new norms of

pandemic life. Despite the view that the pandemic left us grumpier and meaner, that didn't show up in the trait survey, as "agreeableness" did not noticeably change during the pandemic.

The study also looked at [health outcomes](#) and how they were tied to personality traits, along with individual variations in these measures. While on average there was an increase in conscientiousness, it didn't apply to everyone.

And those individuals who did not see the increase accordingly didn't see the benefits. People who went up in the conscientious scale also were better off toward the later phases of the pandemic, both mentally and with their [physical health](#).

But the effects of personality change can be difficult to interpret. The improved health outcomes for more conscientious individuals could be reflecting resilience of that individual, or "the personality trait change itself may have been protective and actually helping them to maintain health during this difficult time," Willroth said.

Increased conscientiousness can pay off, and previous research suggests that the personality shift may stick around.

"Anytime we have these sustained changes to our daily life, it's going to impact us," she said.

Even as many aspects of our daily lives now resemble our pre-pandemic lives, that doesn't mean the ways the pandemic changed us are going back to baseline, she added.

More information: Kalista M. Kyle et al, Personality Trait Change

Across a Major Global Stressor, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2024). DOI: [10.1177/01461672241228624](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672241228624)

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