

Researchers discover links between personality traits and eating disorder onset

June 18 2024



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

A new study reveals further insight into the links between personality traits and the onset of eating disorder symptoms.

Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, are serious and potentially life-threatening [mental illnesses](#) that affect around 1.25 million people in the UK. Characterized by intense fears surrounding eating, weight and [body shape](#), these disorders can cause a significant amount of psychological distress and often co-occur alongside other conditions such as anxiety and addiction. Anorexia alone has the highest death rate of any psychiatric disorder, but little is known about what causes it, meaning [treatment options](#) are limited and not always effective.

A new study from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London reveals further insight into the links between personality traits and the onset of eating disorder symptoms. These findings could help researchers to design more personalized treatments.

The study, [published](#) in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, uses a comprehensive approach to look at how combinations of different personality traits are linked with the co-development and co-occurrence of eating disorders, depression, anxiety and suicidal risk.

The researchers identified personality profiles that could indicate both the future risk and current diagnoses of eating disorders and several co-occurring conditions. They found that neuroticism—an individual's tendency to experience negative emotion—and impulsivity are two key personality traits that could serve as early risk factors for future anxiety and dieting behaviors.

According to the findings, interventions and therapies that focus on personality traits like neuroticism could be key to preventing the development of eating disorders among those at risk.

"Imagine experiences of negative emotions as if you were driving on a

bumpy road. People high in neuroticism might find themselves encountering those bumps more frequently and feeling them more intensely. They often exhibit heightened sensitivity to stressors, and perceive them as more threatening or challenging. This may lead to avoidance or maladaptive coping strategies. Therefore, neuroticism has a strong link to mental health," says Dr. Zuo Zhang, first author of the study and postdoctoral researcher at the Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Centre at King's IoPPN.

The team analyzed data from three samples with overlapping measures of psychopathology (i.e. symptoms) and personality: a longitudinal adolescent sample involving repeated observations over ~10 years (IMAGEN), and clinical samples of young adults with eating disorders (ESTRA), major depression or alcohol use disorder (STRATIFY).

Neuroticism was found to be a [diagnostic marker](#) for both anorexia and bulimia, while impulsivity had specific links to bulimia. As well as this, findings suggest that hopelessness is a key diagnostic marker of depression, anxiety and suicidal risk occurring alongside eating disorders, while extraversion was found to have potential protective factors linked with lower depressive risks in patients with bulimia.

The study could play a key role in informing the design of new eating disorder treatments that target specific personality traits.

Dr. Zhang adds, "[Our findings] suggest that interventions targeting hopelessness and introversion may improve clinical outcomes. For people who are feeling hopeless, therapies can focus on challenging negative beliefs and thoughts, teaching coping skills to manage stress and setbacks, and setting achievable goals to foster a sense of hope and agency. For more introverted people, therapies can include strategies to improve social skills, increase assertiveness, and build confidence in social interactions."

"Such easily applicable prediction and diagnostic markers could play a key role in informing the design of new, personalized eating disorder treatments that target specific [personality traits](#)," says Professor Sylvane Desrivières, senior author of the study and Professor of Biological Psychiatry at the Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Centre at King's IoPPN.

By understanding the mechanisms and risk factors of eating disorders and co-occurring mental health conditions, we can get closer to developing more personalized intervention and prevention strategies—improving outcomes for both at-risk individuals and those already living with these devastating illnesses.

More information: Zuo Zhang et al, Distinct personality profiles associated with disease risk and diagnostic status in eating disorders, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2024.05.132](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2024.05.132)

Provided by King's College London

Citation: Researchers discover links between personality traits and eating disorder onset (2024, June 18) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-links-personality-traits-disorder-onset.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--