

People's life goals relate to their personality type, study suggests

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In the first research of its kind, a new University of California, Davis, study suggests that for the most part, people formulate goals consistent with their personality traits—and an individual's goals are related to how

their personality subsequently changes over time.

The study surveyed more than 500 students when they started college, each year during college, and 20 years later on their goals related to being creative, having a successful career, having a family, being wealthy, or being active in religion or politics. The goals of these UC Berkeley students—about half were still responding after two decades—remained relatively stable over time, though there were some notable changes.

"This study was a unique opportunity to examine how individuals' personalities and major life goals were related to each other across two decades of life," said Olivia E. Atherton, the lead author of the study and former doctoral student in psychology at UC Davis. "We found that, in many ways, one's [personality](#) shapes the types of life goals that are valued, and as a result of pursuing those goals, personality changes."

Successful people stress goals

Various enormously successful people, such as Albert Einstein, have noted the importance of goals, researchers said. Einstein once said, for example: "If you want to live a happy life, tie it to a goal, not to people or things." The personality characteristics he possessed were likely the driving force behind the types of goals he aimed to achieve, researchers said.

"Einstein's tendency to be creative, curious, and intellectual likely fueled his scientific goals, as well as his more aesthetic goals, such as his passion for playing the violin," the study authors wrote.

The study, "Stability and Change in Personality Traits and Major Life Goals from College to Midlife," was published in late August in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Besides Atherton, co-authors include Richard Robins, a professor of psychology who is director of the UC Davis Personality, Self and Emotion Lab; as well as Emily Grijalva, University of Buffalo; and Brent W. Roberts, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

The personality traits examined in the present study are termed the "Big Five" in psychology. They are neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. These five traits broadly capture most of the ways in which people differ from one another, and they are related to a wide range of important life outcomes.

Researchers examined these traits, along with aesthetic goals (wanting to be creative and artistic); economic goals (wanting to have a successful career and be wealthy); family/relationship goals (wanting to be married and have children); hedonistic goals (wanting to have fun and experience pleasure); political goals (wanting to have influence in public affairs); religious goals (wanting to participate in religious institutions); and social goals (wanting to help others in need).

"... We found that, on average, individuals increased in agreeableness and conscientiousness, decreased in neuroticism, and showed little change in openness to experience and extraversion from age 18 to 40," researchers said.

Some goals become less relevant

They also found that people place less importance on all goals over time, suggesting that individuals winnow the goals they value with age, presumably because they are achieving milestones associated with those goals and thus, the goals become less important as a result.

"By identifying their own personal strengths and limitations, middle-aged adults may place less importance on certain major life goals

because some goals may no longer be viewed as self-relevant," researchers said.

The authors did find that [personality traits](#) are related to major life [goal](#) development over time. For example, individuals who become more agreeable, kind and compassionate, also tend to place more emphasis on social and family/relationship goals over time. And, individuals who become more responsible, organized and self-controlled tend to value more economic and family goals.

More information: Olivia E. Atherton et al, Stability and Change in Personality Traits and Major Life Goals From College to Midlife, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167220949362](#)

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