

Stress (Personality Types)

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Both stress and personality types are multifaceted topics that have been defined in multiple ways. Examining the relationship between stress and personality types is complex; however, literature on this relationship is well-established. While early research on the relationship between personality and stress focused on unidimensional personality traits, such as the relationship between stress and Type A personality, optimism, and hostility, research in this field today takes a comprehensive approach conceptualizing personality in five dimensions. The most widely accepted method of defining personality today is the Big Five model, consisting of five independent factors of personality: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, and Conscientiousness (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Each factor of personality is associated with specific traits, such as Extraversion with positivity, assertiveness, and warm, Neuroticism with anxiety, hostility, and irrational thinking, Openness with curious, flexible, and intellectual, Agreeableness with compliant, altruistic, and trustworthy, and Conscientiousness with organized, achievement-oriented, and rational. These traits influence ways individuals perceive stress and thus, each factor of personality has been linked to specific coping strategies and ways of responding to distinct stressors.

Extraversion (E.): Findings have been consistent across several studies that individuals high in E are flexible in dealing with stress and do so effectively. This may be because individuals high in E tend to have greater social networks and more confidants, which leads them to successfully seek out their networks for support when needed in comparison to other personality types. The high energy and activity level often found in persons high in E contributes to these

individuals using effective problem-solving coping strategies such as rational action.

Extraversion also negatively predicts the utilization of less-effective coping strategies such as emotion-focused coping when faced with stressful stimuli.

Neuroticism (N.): In contrast to individuals high in E, those high in N have lower expectations that support will be available when needed. Such individuals have higher levels of perceived stress due to their higher levels of negative emotions and anxiety, which leads to the use of maladaptive coping mechanisms. These individuals are less likely to use problem-solving coping strategies such as planning when faced with a stressor, and more likely to use less effective, emotion-focused coping strategies such as escape-avoidance, emotional venting, and hostile reactions. Ultimately, Neuroticism is often linked to poor coping and the inability to choose effective strategies, which can consequently exacerbate stressful situations.

Openness to experience (O.): Consistent with expectations that those higher in O would be adaptive, flexible copers, previous studies have found individuals high in O to report using positive emotion-focused strategies. Specific emotion-focused strategies frequently employed by individuals who are more open to experiences include hostile reaction, sedation, and reappraisal.

Agreeableness (A.): While the association between Agreeableness and stress is less understood than other personality factors of the Big Five model, previous literature has found those high in A to use both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. In regards to emotion-focused coping strategies, those high in A tend to use methods such as social support and positive reappraisal when faced with stress. Further, these individuals also employ problem-focused strategies such as planning.

Conscientiousness (C.): Due to the stable and well-adjusted nature of individuals high in C, researchers have found Conscientiousness to be related to less stress over the course of life.

Persons high in C address their problems actively when faced with stress, and tend to use active and rational problem-focused coping compared to those lower in C.

In personality and stress is complex due to the various models and theories that exist within each field. However, prior studies examining the correlations between stress and the Big Five model reveals there are some associations between each dimension of personality and specific coping responses. Because personality traits significantly influence an individual's perception of the world, including their perception of stressful stimuli, personality is directly linked to how individuals perceive and respond to stress. Few would argue personality is the sole factor that determines how individuals respond to stressors, but rather one of the many factors contributing to the variety of ways individuals perceive and respond to stressful stimuli.

Further Reading:

McCrae, R. R. & John, O. P. (1992). An introduction to the Five-Factor Model and its applications. *Journal of Personality, 60*, 175-215.

Penley, J. A., & Tomaka, J. (2002). Associations among the big five, emotional responses and coping with acute stress. *Personality and Individual Differences, 32*(7), 1215-1128.

Vollrath, M. (2001). Personality and stress. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 42*(4), 335-347.