

# Considering the role of personality for healthy ageing

Dr Mathias Allemand and Dr Patrick L. Hill discuss the complex factors contributing to healthy ageing, and explore the ways in which personality traits can be considered as a component

The importance of promoting healthy ageing has never been clearer. Individuals are living longer lives than ever before, which places greater importance on the understanding of factors and processes that promote cognitive, social, and physical health and improve well-being and quality of life. Although the final endpoint may be the same for all, individuals differ greatly in the extent to which they enact healthy lifestyle behaviours across adulthood, and in their likelihood of experiencing health risks. In recent decades, efforts to better understand why some individuals experience more or less positive ageing trajectories have pointed to the value of considering personality.

This article discusses three ways in which personality can be considered in promoting healthy ageing.

## Identifying facets of personality to promote healthy ageing

What aspects of personality promote healthy ageing outcomes such as health and well-being, quality of life and vital longevity? Much of the research focus here has been on personality traits that, by definition, are viewed as relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The relationship between

personality traits and healthy ageing outcomes has been well-documented. For example, there is empirical evidence that traits such as conscientiousness (being organised, industrious, and more self-controlled) and neuroticism (having more emotional volatility, being more anxious and down) have relevance for health and well-being, health behaviours and longevity. Longitudinal studies have consistently supported the role of personality traits, such as these, as informative for understanding who experiences better health trajectories in adulthood and even longer lives. However, because of the focus on these broad dispositions, little is known about the dynamic personality processes that underlie these longitudinal findings. Basic research is needed to identify the psychological and behavioural processes and everyday contexts that trigger the expression of traits; for instance, conscientious individuals may hold different perspectives on their future which influences their propensity to enact healthy behaviours in daily life. Translational research is needed to better understand the ways in which information about these processes may be utilised to promote health and well-being in everyday contexts. Understanding how to promote conscientious thoughts and behaviours

not only can inform intervention efforts to promote healthy ageing, but also may yield insights into our second topic.

## Modifying facets of personality to promote healthy ageing

How much can we shape personality traits, given that they are seen as relatively stable? Despite the relative enduring nature of personality traits, a large body of longitudinal evidence has shown that personality traits are malleable and continue to develop across adulthood, even into advanced age, albeit at a slow rate. The overall picture suggests that people become more emotionally stable, or conversely, less neurotic, more confident, agreeable, and conscientious with age – at least until early older adulthood. Only recently have studies addressed the provocative question of whether and how one can intentionally intervene to modify or change personality traits in desired directions. Two examples from our work in non-clinical (younger) samples provide valuable illustrations. First, we examined the effects of a short text-messaging based intervention to either promote self-discipline or openness to action. For two weeks, younger people received daily text messages twice a day including

behavioural and self-reflection tasks, scientific information, and feedback. Using a smartphone intervention allowed a higher intensity compared to face-to-face interventions with psychologists because it provides daily connections with participants. Results showed that people showed greater increases in the trait of interest (self-discipline or openness to action) compared with the other group. Changes were maintained until follow-up two and six weeks after the end of the intervention. These results suggest that people can successfully attain desired changes in personality traits. Second, we examined the effects of a three-month digital intervention for personality change using a randomised controlled trial and the personality coaching smartphone application (PEACH) developed as part of the project. Results have shown that people who received the intervention showed greater self-reported trait changes compared to people in the waitlist control group, who had to wait one month before receiving the intervention. These changes aligned with participants' goals for change, across multiple personality traits, and were found both for people who wanted to increase or decrease on their chosen trait. Observers such as friends, family members, or intimate partners were able to detect increases in personality traits. Moreover, personality changes persisted until three months after the end of the intervention. Understanding how personality traits can be modified and the potential benefits and challenges of such modification holds promise for advancing efforts to promote healthier and longer lives, and it must be considered in the context and consideration of our final point.

### Maintaining the functionality of facets of personality to promote healthy ageing

How does the impact of personality traits change in the face of naturally occurring age-related challenges? Older adulthood is typically characterised by environmental changes in the primary social contexts and social roles such as loss of the spouse or other important interaction partners. It is also characterised by complex individual changes and processes in multiple domains of functioning, such as declining cognitive and physiological health, as well as increasing rates of chronic illnesses. Facing the challenges of ageing may not only impact daily living but also personality and the functionality of traits. For example, there is reason to believe that increases in neuroticism may align with age-associated changes and losses; and there is evidence that health and functional impairments can limit how individuals express their traits. Therefore, a third way to consider personality in promoting healthy ageing is to have a better understanding of how to maintain or stabilise the positive functioning of personality traits on healthy ageing outcomes. To date, however, little is known about the maintenance of the positive effects of personality traits in older adulthood. Understanding how the functionality of personality traits can be maintained despite the age-related challenges holds promise for advancing efforts to promote healthier and longer lives.

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Research described in this article was funded in part by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant No. 159349 and Grant No. 162724)



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