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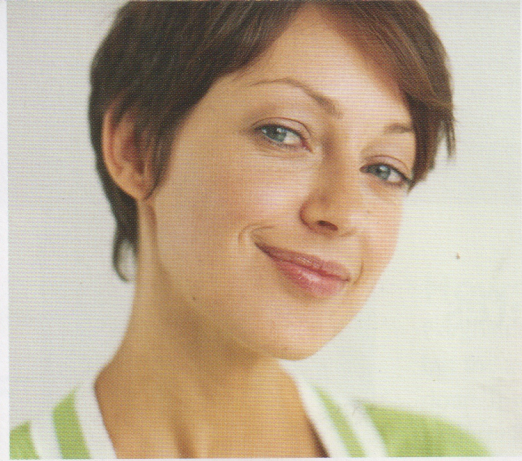


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Mar/Apr 2018





HOW YOUR PERSONALITY AFFECTS YOUR HEALTH

Expert Health Advice for Common Personality Traits

Are you a people pleaser? A worrier? A workaholic? Whatever your tendencies, it's proven that your thoughts and behaviors influence your health. Here's how to make sure your personality traits help—instead of hurt—your well-being.

By Christa Melnyk Hines

Nefertari Williams says her desire to help others is a driving force in her life. “It’s almost to the point that I feel I have no purpose unless I am serving,” says Williams, a New Jersey mom of five children between the ages of 9 and 24, and a grandmother of a three-year-old.

But nine years ago when Williams was pregnant with her fifth child, she suffered a spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD). SCAD is an unusual condition that typically strikes young, otherwise healthy women without warning.

Now in congestive heart failure, Williams has slowed down her life dramatically.

“I went from working full time and selling beauty products while raising five children to becoming an exhausted pile of a person,” she says.

While she admits her physical limitations get her down, Williams remains optimistic.

“I lucked out because Facebook became very popular around the time of

my heart attack, so I have launched several online businesses which allow me to still be ‘me’—helping others, involved and ultra social!”

What can we learn from someone like Williams?

People who focus on the bright side cope better with life’s adversities. Numerous studies find that optimism is linked to better physical health, more positive health outcomes following disease diagnosis, and greater longevity overall compared to more pessimistic individuals.

Researchers say that our personalities, which often impact how we react to life situations, can predict our susceptibility to future health conditions.

“The good news is that you can change,” says Mimi Guarneri, M.D., president of the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine in La Jolla, California.

Often, change can be simple tweaks in behavior. For example, if you tend toward pessimism, you can practice positive change by adopting a daily gratitude practice, such as listing five to 10 things for which you’re grateful.

Personality is formed through a combination of genetics and nurture, but it is also influenced by coping skills, changing hormones, support systems, and even diet.

“The first step is to recognize who you are: ‘How do I respond to stress? Do I get angry if I haven’t eaten?’” Guarneri says. “In taking care of the whole person, it’s not enough to know your cholesterol level. Let’s talk about your family, your work, your finances. Let’s talk about things that are important to you.”

What is personality?

According to the American Psychological Association, personality is the individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

The better you know yourself, the better you'll understand how to take care of yourself. Keep in mind your own personality as you consider the following health advice:



If you tend to be introverted or isolated ...

→ **make more friends.**

Isolation and loneliness is a growing epidemic in our country that can be as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to research. Compared to 30 years ago, fewer Americans can name more than one or two people in their lives who they feel comfortable confiding in. The absence of strong social connections puts us at risk for early mortality, cognitive decline, high blood pressure, depression, and coronary disease.

Extraverted personalities thrive on social interaction, and as a result, tend to be healthier. Spending time with friends boosts our levels of the hormone oxytocin, which reduces blood pressure, soothes stress levels, and buffers the immune system.

Does this mean if you prefer time to yourself that you are more likely to get sick?

Not necessarily. It isn't the quantity of friends you have that benefits your health, but the *quality* of your relationships, says Laura Brannon, Ph.D., a social psychologist at Kansas State University.

"If an introverted person has a few close friends, that could be just as beneficial as an extroverted person who has a lot of friends," Brannon says.

Struggling to find your tribe? Start a neighborhood book club, take a class, get involved at a church, or volunteer at your local animal shelter. Seek activities that give your life meaning and purpose, and you'll likely find people who you'll feel a connection with.



If you're over-committed or a people pleaser ...

→ **know when to say "no."**

Finding purpose and meaning in your life through service to others can be key to a healthy life. But service isn't healthy if you're constantly saying "yes" out of a sense of obligation or a fear of displeasing someone.

Signs that you're overextended include frequently feeling overwhelmed, frazzled, depressed, and resentful, which can weaken the immune system, making you less resistant to sickness.

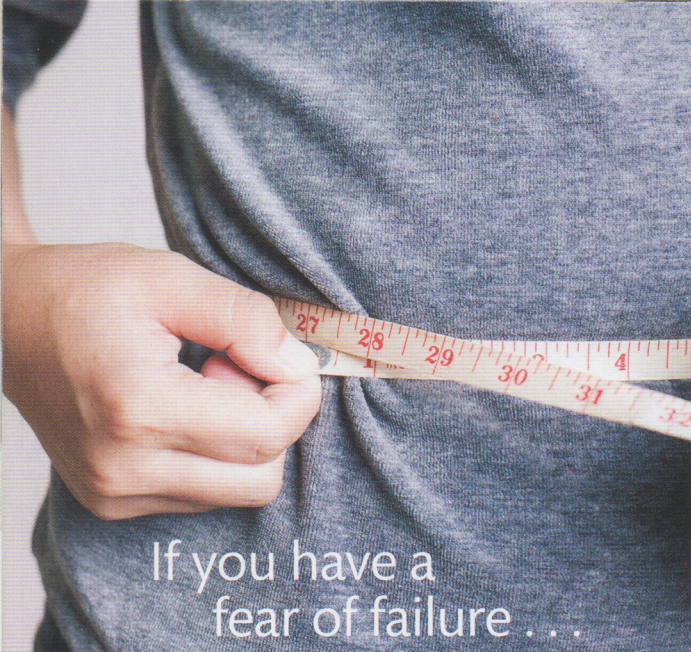
When faced with opportunities or obligations, consider your priorities. If volunteering is taking away from your family, detracting from your health, or creating an obstacle to other pursuits that give you joy, begin pulling back.

When you graciously turn down requests that don't fit into your life, the outcome is almost never as bad you imagine. "If someone told me they were overextended and couldn't help me with something, I'd be disappointed, but I wouldn't stop being their friend," Brannon says.

If the person requesting your help doesn't understand your needs, you have several options in how you respond: "Oftentimes, the other people will respond in an appropriate way, and if they don't—if they're overly demanding—either compromise, stand firm, or evaluate whether the relationship is healthy," says Brannon.

Even the obligations we care deeply about can take an emotional and physical toll if we aren't taking personal time-outs. If you care for children or an elderly parent (or both), schedule space on your calendar for personal downtime, such as getting a massage or meeting up with a friend. Hire a babysitter, or ask for help from your spouse or other family members. If you don't take care of your own needs, you won't be healthy enough to care for anyone to the best of your ability.





If you have a
fear of failure . . .

→ **manage stress—
and expectations.**

At 68, Charles Smith is semiretired, working part-time as a major gifts fundraiser for Texas Methodist Foundation in Austin. Just as his self-discipline makes him a valued employee, his determination has helped him transform his health.

Ten years ago, Smith was 60 pounds overweight, stressed out, diagnosed with hypertension and frequently on the road for his job in Newport Beach, California.

“I felt a fear of failure—of not wanting to be associated with anything that failed,” Smith says when describing what pushed him to work so hard.

Then, Smith landed in a minor emergency center for chest pain.

“The chest pain didn’t show up as anything to be concerned about, but it began to weigh on my mind,” he says. At around the same time, he was introduced to Dr. Guarneri while she was promoting her book *The Heart Speaks* and decided to make an appointment with her.

Since that first appointment, he’s lost the weight, quit drinking alcohol, eats a mostly vegetarian diet, walks regularly at a nearby gym, and is no longer on blood pressure medication.

“The most diligent work I’ve done recently is being aware of what I can learn from a situation that causes me stress, realizing that I have choices about what can be done about it,” Smith says.



If you’re a workaholic . . .

→ **get some rest.**


Dr. J. Mark Anderson, partner at Executive Medicine of Texas in Southlake, treats many successful professionals who struggle to balance fast-paced, demanding careers with maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Luckily, because many workaholics are disciplined personality types, they’re more likely to stick to a treatment plan if they experience a health scare, Anderson says. But it’s better to adopt a practical health plan before a coronary event stops you in your tracks.

Sleep deprivation is one of the biggest health concerns Anderson sees among his patients, many of whom travel for their jobs and have trouble shutting down the day. Chronic sleep deprivation not only affects judgment and the ability to retain information, but it also can lead to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and early mortality.

Plan to hit the sack at the same time every night. And make sure you stick to a wholesome diet, which will give you the energy to embrace a hectic day. If you travel, pack healthy snacks and scope out a grocery store near your hotel where you can purchase a nutritious meal.

Also, avoid relying on alcohol to help you wind down. “It throws off your sleep,” Anderson says. “You may fall asleep because of the alcohol, but the quality of sleep is very poor. When you get up the next morning, you’re already behind the eight ball, trying to catch up.”



If you're
type A,
pessimistic,
or a worrier . . .

↳ *practice calmness.*

Anxiety, depression, anger, and chronic distress flood the body with the stress hormone cortisol, which can suppress the immune system, affect quality sleep, and cause a host of health issues, including weight gain, headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes, and heart disease.

"An anger outburst increases the risk of a heart attack 230 percent, and that's because angry people tend to be flooding their body with stress hormones," explains Guarneri. "These stress hormones raise blood pressure, constrict coronaries, increase cholesterol, increase blood sugar, and put weight on in your midline."

People who don't get riled up about much are sometimes referred to as type B personalities. They tend to be more creative, slower to anger, less sleep deprived, and more collaborative.

Because type B's tend to be more satisfied with life in general, they are also more likely to take good care of themselves by adopting healthy lifestyle habits.

"The rest of us should probably emulate that a bit," Anderson says. "Sometimes you need to be around somebody who is that laid-back personality—maybe it will rub off on you."

Incorporate daily calming practices, such as deep breathing exercises, prayer, walking in nature, and keeping a gratitude journal.

"Pessimists and worriers can benefit from keeping a journal of their worries or negative thoughts and rereading it every month or so," Brannon says. "Many times they see that their worst fears didn't actually happen and they can look back and see that they frequently got themselves worked up over nothing."



If you're stuck in a rut . . .

↳ *seek out new experiences.*

Stuck in a boring routine? Better shake things up. Researchers at University College London found that people who complain of high levels of boredom are twice as likely to die from heart disease or stroke, particularly if they manage their boredom by drinking excessively, smoking, or abusing drugs.

When we engage in a novel experience, meet a new person, or learn something new, we're rewarded with a hit of dopamine, a "feel-good" chemical in the brain.

Overall, people who are intellectually curious and more open to new experiences feel more positive about their life and experience less stress. They tend to get absorbed in activities that give their lives meaning. These are all traits that help protect them against depression and boost their overall health.

Expand your horizons. Check out the new art exhibit across town. Try a new restaurant. Learn a language. Visit a destination on your bucket list.

Remember, we aren't stuck with our personality flaws. "Everything is possible to change," says Guarneri. "Just don't wait to have a major event like a heart attack or a stroke before you make that decision." ▮

Christa Melnyk Hines is a freelance journalist and the author of *Happy, Healthy & Hyperconnected: Raise a Thoughtful Communicator in a Digital World* and *Confidently Connected: A Mom's Guide to a Satisfying Social Life*.