

The Power of Agreeableness

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Michael D. Robinson

Michael D. Robinson thinks that figuring out why some people are agreeable can lead to interventions that help disagreeable people avoid anger, aggression, and failed relationships. Surprisingly, his research has shown that the mere presence of hostile thoughts doesn't actually predict disagreeableness. The same video clip about a drug addict, for example, can lead to feelings of hostility and blame in both agreeable and disagreeable individuals. Yet only disagreeable people translate hostility and blame into anger and aggression.

The difference seems to be that agreeable people recruit positive, pro-social thoughts in hostile contexts. Their positive thoughts allow them to regulate hostility before it gets out of hand.

This self-regulation makes agreeable people remarkably good at keeping their cool. In one experiment, Robinson's team primed participants with hostile thoughts and then asked them to perform a task that required a great deal of motor control. The scientists were shocked that hostile primes actually seemed to make agreeable people better at the motor control task. "If you look at the cognitive literature," Robinson said, "hostile thoughts should only promote dysregulation."

Preliminary results also indicate that hot-tempered individuals may learn to benefit from self-regulation. In the lab, Robinson and his colleagues found that participants who were trained to replace hostile words like hit and murder with helpful words like admire and forgive were less likely to punish an imaginary opponent with irritating noise blasts. Nice guys, it turns out, can teach the rest of us some important

lessons about managing our emotions.

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