

Neuroticism Predicts Anxiety and Depression Disorders

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The personality dimension of neuroticism — characterized by an individual's tendency to experience negative emotions, especially in response to stress — has been shown to predict several forms of psychopathology, including substance abuse, mood disorders, and anxiety disorders. But does it predict one type of disorder more strongly than the others?

To better understand how neuroticism relates to various mental health outcomes, psychological scientist Richard Zinbarg, professor of psychology in the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern University, and colleagues recruited 547 teenage participants from ethnically and socioeconomically highly diverse high schools in Chicago and Los Angeles to participate in a longitudinal study.

The students, high school juniors at the time the study began, completed scientifically validated measures of personality. Based on their scores, the researchers categorized the students as having low, medium, or high levels of neuroticism. The students then completed an assessment gauging the extent to which they experienced symptoms of various mental disorders, which they completed again every 10 to 18 months over the next 3 years.

The [findings](#), published in *Clinical Psychological Science*, indicate that teens who score high on the personality trait of neuroticism are highly likely to develop both anxiety and depression disorders. Furthermore, the researchers found that neuroticism is a stronger predictor of these types of disorders than it is of substance abuse.

“Neuroticism was an especially strong predictor of the particularly pernicious state of developing both anxiety and depressive disorders,” Zinbarg said in a [press release](#).

According to the researchers, the study results offer indicate that clinicians and researchers may be able to develop a relatively cost-effective strategy for prevention that reduces risk for both depression and anxiety disorders.

High schools students, Zinbarg said, could be given a questionnaire on neuroticism — either via paper and pencil or administered online — that determines their standing on that personality trait. High scores would then indicate those students who are most likely to benefit from, and are most in need of, intervention.

“It’s been my professional dream to be able to prevent the development of anxiety disorders and depression in people who would have otherwise experienced them,” said Zinbarg, director of clinical psychology at Northwestern. “We have pretty good treatments once people have already started suffering from them. We do a lot less on prevention.”

The results also shed light on a theoretical controversy about neuroticism and its definition.

“Some, including me, believe that neuroticism is somewhat specific,” Zinbarg said. “The theorists in this camp believe that neuroticism makes people more susceptible to the negative emotions — anxiety, depression, irritability, anger.”

Others believe that neuroticism heightens susceptibility to emotions in general, including those that are positive. In that view, neuroticism would be as much a predictor of disorders of excess, like gambling or substance use, as of disorders that involve inhibition and pain.

“The study’s results strongly suggest that neuroticism is more sensitive to threat than emotional reactivity writ large,” Zinbarg concluded.

Reference

Zinbarg, R.E., Mineka, S., Bobova, L., Craske, M.G., Vrshek-Schallhorn, S., Griffith, J.W.,...Anand, D. (2016). Testing a hierarchical model of neuroticism and its cognitive facets: Latent structure and prospective prediction of first onsets of anxiety and unipolar mood disorders during 3 years in late adolescence. *Clinical Psychological Science*. doi: [10.1177/2167702615618162](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702615618162)