

How lockdown may have changed your personality?

There wasn't just one lockdown – we all had our own experience. Some people were forced into months of unbroken solitude, others trapped for weeks on end with an estranged spouse. Some saw it as a positive experience – a welcome opportunity to slow down, go for walks and relax with a loving partner, or enjoy quality time with the children.

Whichever way the lockdown played out, there has been one near universal aspect to the past months – it abruptly disrupted our daily routines and living arrangements in ways that would not normally occur.

Will this strange time have left its mark on us, not just superficially, but deep down? As we venture out tentatively, do we do so with our personalities somehow altered? And if so, how will our new selves cope as we begin to mix and travel once again.

For much of psychology's history, personality – the set of enduring habits of behaviour, emotion and thought that form each person's unique identity – was considered set in stone, at least beyond early adulthood. Research over the last few decades, however, has led to a consensus that, while personality traits are relatively stable, they are not completely fixed. Instead they continue to evolve through life and in response to major life events. In other words, from a theoretical perspective, there is every possibility that at least some of us will have been left changed by lockdown.

Social distancing has meant that people have had to get along without the usual daily face-to-face contact with friends, family and colleagues .

Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest the same. Although conscious that I've been more fortunate than many in my experience of the pandemic so far, I also know that I've been feeling less stressed due to less rushing around, but also more withdrawn and introverted. Friends of mine (also not too adversely affected) agree they feel different – more reflective, perhaps, but also less sociable.

The many months of changes to our routines may have led to changes in our behaviour that will stick long after the pandemic has finished. It “may lead to new norms, which may over time also shape our personalities,” says Wiebke Bleidorn at the Personality Change Laboratory at the University of California, Davis

'Lockdown might have turbo-charged a phenomenon known as 'The Michelangelo Effect'.

But while many of the experts I contacted agreed that the pandemic, and the accompanying lockdowns, likely have already changed our personalities, at least a little, they also noted that it's very difficult to say exactly how much people will have been changed and in what ways. This is partly due to the lack of longitudinal data, but also because people's experiences of lockdown were so different and would have interacted with their pre-pandemic traits.

“I don't think there will be an average effect ... a trend that the majority of people will show,” says Rodica Damian, from the Personality Development and Success Laboratory at the University of Houston.

Some preliminary data back this up. Angelina Sutin, a psychologist at Florida State University, led an as yet unpublished study that looked for signs of personality change during the very early stage of the pandemic in the US. It showed that most traits showed no average-level change at all, and contrary to expectations, average neuroticism actually fell slightly for those not in isolation, perhaps because people attributed feelings of stress to what was going on in the world, rather than to their own personality. Similarly, the personality

testing company Hogan Assessments released preliminary data from the US suggesting average personality test scores had not changed during the first weeks of lockdown, up until early May. But while we may not have developed a collective “lockdown personality”, at least not in the early stages, there are some prior findings that hint at ways we might have been changed idiosyncratically, dependent on our specific circumstances. For instance, the lockdown might have turbo-charged a phenomenon known as “The Michelangelo Effect”, which refers to the way we are more likely to develop into the kind of person we want to be if we’re with a close romantic partner who supports and encourages us to behave in line with our aspirations – akin to a sculptor helping to reveal our ideal self.

People’s daily routines have been severely disrupted by the pandemic, which over time can lead to new ideas of what is normal.

People in loving relationships might also have had the chance to grow closer and deepen their bonds, notes Bleidorn, and to reflect on life and their priorities.

“This time of reflection might lead to increases in ‘self-concept clarity’ – the degree to which people have coherent beliefs about themselves and their goals in life,” she says.

For people with a supportive partner, then the intense period of the lockdown might have offered a welcome opportunity for personal growth. By contrast, for people stuck indoors for months in an unhappy relationship or being harassed by their children, the effects on their personality are sure to be have been negative. “For example, there is some evidence that being in an unhappy marriage (independent of lockdown) is associated with declines in spouses’ self-esteem and happiness,” says Bleidorn.

People who score highly for neuroticism might have particularly struggled in this regard – this trait is associated with a tendency toward “negative emotions like anxiety, vulnerability, sadness, and irritability,” explains Rebecca Shiner, a clinical psychologist at Colgate University. “People who struggle with high neuroticism also are prone to creating more stress for themselves, for example, by getting into conflict with other people or by avoiding situations that they find threatening.”

What about those people who were left completely isolated on their own during lockdown? If this forced solitary confinement provoked intense loneliness, we might predict, based on earlier research into loneliness and personality, an adverse effect on people’s traits, in terms of increased neuroticism and an enforced reduction in extroversion. Yet, the lockdown data available to date paints a picture of human resilience.

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