What Is Personality?

At its most basic, personality is the characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that make a person unique. It is believed that personality arises from within the individual and remains fairly consistent throughout life.

Examples of personality can be found in how we describe other people's traits. For instance, "She is generous, caring, and a bit of a perfectionist," or "They are loyal and protective of their friends."

The word "personality" stems from the Latin word *persona*, which refers to a theatrical mask worn by performers in order to either project different roles or disguise their identities.

While there are many different definitions of personality, most focus on the pattern of behaviors and characteristics that can help predict and explain a person's behavior.

Explanations for personality can focus on a variety of influences, ranging from genetic effects to the role of the environment and experience in shaping an individual's personality.

Personality Characteristics

What exactly makes up a personality? Traits and patterns of thought and emotion play important roles, and so do these fundamental characteristics of personality:

- **Consistency**: There is generally a recognizable order and regularity to behaviors. Essentially, people act in the same way or in similar ways in a variety of situations.
- **Both psychological and physiological**: Personality is a psychological construct, but research suggests that it is also influenced by biological processes and needs.
- **Affects behaviors and actions**: Personality not only influences how we move and respond in our environment, but it also *causes* us to act in certain ways.
- **Multiple expressions**: Personality is displayed in more than just behavior. It can also be seen in our thoughts, feelings, close relationships, and other social interactions.

The "Big Five" Personality Traits

How Personality Develops

There are a number of theories about personality, and different schools of thought in psychology influence many of these theories. Some theories describe how personalities are expressed, and others focus more on how personality develops.

Personality Types

Type theories suggest that there are a limited number of personality types that are related to biological influences.

One theory suggests there are four types of personality. They are:

- **Type A**: Perfectionist, impatient, competitive, work-obsessed, achievement-oriented, aggressive, stressed
- **Type B**: Low stress, even-tempered, flexible, creative, adaptable to change, patient, tendency to procrastinate
- **Type C**: Highly conscientious, perfectionist, struggles to reveal emotions (positive and negative)
- **Type D**: Worrying, sad, irritable, pessimistic, negative self-talk, avoidance of social situations, lack of self-confidence, fear of rejection, appears gloomy, hopeless

There are other popular theories of personality types such as the Myers-Briggs theory. The Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator identifies a personality based on where someone is on four continuums: introversion-extraversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judging-perceiving.

After taking a Myers-Briggs personality test, you are assigned one of 16 personality types. Examples of these personality types are:[1]

- **ISTJ**: Introverted, sensing, thinking, and judging. People with this personality type are logical and organized; they also tend to be judgmental.
- **INFP**: Introverted, intuitive, feeling, and perceiving. They tend to be idealists and sensitive to their feelings.
- **ESTJ**: Extroverted, sensing, thinking, and judging. They tend to be assertive and concerned with following the rules.
- **ENFJ**: Extroverted, intuitive, feeling, and judging. They are known as "givers" for being warm and loyal; they may also be overprotective.

Personality Traits

Trait theories tend to view personality as the result of internal characteristics that are genetically based and include:

- **Agreeable**: Cares about others, feels empathy, enjoys helping others
- **Conscientiousness**: High levels of thoughtfulness, good impulse control, goal-directed behaviors
- **Eager-to-please**: Accommodating, passive, and conforming
- **Extraversion**: Excitability, sociability, talkativeness, assertiveness, and high amounts of emotional expressiveness
- **Introversion**: Quiet, reserved
- **Neuroticism**: Experiences stress and dramatic shifts in mood, feels anxious, worries about different things, gets upset easily, struggles to bounce back after stressful events
- **Openness**: Very creative, open to trying new things, focuses on tackling new challenges

The Trait Theory of Personality

Psychodynamic Theories

Psychodynamic theories of personality are heavily influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud and emphasize the influence of the unconscious mind on personality. Psychodynamic theories include Sigmund Freud's psychosexual stage theory and Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development.

Behavioral Theories

Behavioral theories suggest that personality is a result of interaction between the individual and the environment. Behavioral theorists study observable and measurable behaviors, often ignoring the role of internal thoughts and feelings. Behavioral theorists include B.F. Skinner and John B. Watson.

Humanist

Humanist theories emphasize the importance of free will and individual experience in developing a personality. Humanist theorists include Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow.

Impact of Personality

Research on personality can yield fascinating insights into how personality develops and changes over the course of a lifetime. This research can also have important practical applications in the real world.

For example, people can use a personality assessment (also called a personality test or personality quiz) to learn more about themselves and

their unique strengths, weaknesses, and preferences. Some assessments might look at how people rank on specific traits, such as whether they are high in extroversion, conscientiousness, or openness.

Other assessments might measure how specific aspects of personality change over time. Some assessments give people insight into how their personality affects many areas of their lives, including career, relationships, personal growth, and more.

Understanding your personality type can help you determine what career you might enjoy, how well you might perform in certain job roles, or how effective a form of psychotherapy could be for you.[2]

Personality type can also have an impact on your health, including how often you visit the doctor and how you cope with stress. Researchers have found that certain personality characteristics may be linked to illness and health behaviors.[3]

How Personality Type Can Affect Physical and Mental Health

Personality Disorders

While personality determines what you think and how you behave, personality disorders are marked by thoughts and behavior that are disruptive and distressing in everyday life. Someone with a personality disorder may have trouble recognizing their condition because their symptoms are ingrained in their personality.

Personality disorders include paranoid personality disorder, schizoid personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, borderline personality disorder (BPD), and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD).[4]

While the symptoms of personality disorders vary based on the condition, some common signs include:

- Aggressive behavior
- Delusional thinking
- Distrust of others
- Flat emotions (no emotional range)
- Lack of interest in relationships
- Violating others' boundaries

Some people with BPD experience suicidal thoughts or behavior as well.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255** for support and assistance from a

trained counselor. If you or a loved one are in immediate danger, call 911.

For more mental health resources, see our National Helpline Database.

If you are concerned that elements of your personality are contributing to stress, anxiety, confusion, or depression, it's important to talk to a doctor or mental health professional. They can help you understand any underlying conditions you may have.

It is often challenging to live with a personality disorder, but there are treatment options such as therapy and medication that can help.