

Personality and NIMH
A Statement from the Association for Research in Personality

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The mission of NIMH is to transform the understanding and treatment of mental illnesses through basic and clinical research, paving the way for prevention, recovery, and cure. For the Institute to continue fulfilling this vital public health mission, it must foster innovative thinking and ensure that a full array of novel scientific perspectives are used to further discovery in the evolving science of brain, behavior, and experience.

In this document, the Association for Research in Personality offers a statement in support of the potential contributions of personality science to the mission of NIMH, showing the critical relevance of personality research at many levels.

One of the most important aspects of personality for understanding psychopathology is *personality traits* – those general tendencies in thought, feeling, and behavior that show marked consistency across time and situations. Research has documented the predictive value of personality traits for the development of a wide array of psychopathology. Numerous meta-analyses have reported the predictive value of trait *neuroticism* in providing a strong dispositional vulnerability for the onset of various forms of mood disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and substance use disorders. Neuroticism (or negative affectivity) is one of the five domains of the well-validated five-factor model (FFM) of personality trait structure, the other four being *extraversion* (vs. *introversion*), *openness to experience*, *agreeableness* (vs. *antagonism*), and *conscientiousness* (or *constraint*). Across a remarkably vast empirical literature, the traits that comprise the FFM have proven to be highly useful in predicting a number of important life outcomes, both positive and negative, such as subjective well-being, social acceptance, relationship conflict, marital status, academic success, criminality, unemployment, physical health, mental health, job satisfaction, and mortality. Conscientiousness, for instance, has particular implications for occupational performance, unemployment, academic success, and, most notably, physical health, predicting mortality rates many years hence (while controlling for other obvious indicators). Agreeableness and extraversion have specific implications for marital status, relationship conflicts, criminality, and social acceptance.

NIMH also embraces translational research – “using modern psychometric and statistical theories to advance fundamental conceptualizations of nosology and consequent approaches toward more focused assessment and treatment of the many dimensions and subtypes that constitute complex psychiatric disorders.” This perspective is fully commensurate with the aims of personality science. Much is now known about the fundamental structure, genetics, mechanisms, course, outcome, and functioning of general personality traits. The research base provides a scientific foundation for considering disorders of personality, a perspective that is sorely lacking in the current nomenclature used by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in describing personality disorders.

NIMH now emphasizes a pandiagnostic perspective, a view that is also fully commensurate with general personality research. Indeed, there is even a rather compelling alignment of general personality trait structure with the Research Domain Criteria (RDoC). RDoC negative valence (i.e., anxiety, fear, threat) clearly aligns well with FFM neuroticism, which is the disposition to experience negative affects, such as anxiety, fear, vulnerability, and anger. Positive valence (reward, approach) aligns well with FFM extraversion, as positive affectivity is the driving temperament for extraversion. Social processes align with FFM agreeableness (versus antagonism) and introversion (versus extraversion), in that these have been proposed to be the two fundamental dimensions for depicting interpersonal relatedness.

At the cutting edge perhaps of this pandiagnostic perspective is the current development of treatment programs for neuroticism, referred to as the Unified Protocol (UP) for the transdiagnostic treatment of emotional disorders. Eschewing the fragmented categorical approach embodied by the APA Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the UP targets the identification and modification of fundamental temperamental emotions that cut across existing diagnostic categories. Given the impact of neuroticism on future mental and physical health, even minimal to mild improvements in levels of neuroticism can have considerable public health care benefits. A comparable effort is also now being explored for the personality disorders that stem from the dynamics of trait conscientiousness, given this trait's significant impact on future health and functioning.

NIMH is also emphasizing a cognitive neuroscience perspective, which is readily congruent with a vast body of existing basic science personality research. Personality neuroscience is a vibrant domain of investigation. The rise of neuroscience technologies for brain imaging, psychopharmacological manipulation, and molecular genetics has led to a proliferation of research concerning the neural substrates of personality. Much of this personality neuroscience research should be of direct relevance, benefit, and interest to the mission of NIMH.

Finally, beyond the fundamental dispositional traits that comprise the FFM, personality researchers have examined the specific social-cognitive mechanisms and motivations that impact psychopathology and mental health. Personality extends beyond traits to include other, more specific and contextualized aspects of psychological individuality, and these, too, have implications for the development and treatment of psychopathology. For example, substantial research has shown that interventions targeting personal goals, mindsets, coping mechanisms, and components of narrative identity are successful in improving outcomes in normative populations, and in some cases more at-risk groups. Further, research has shown that the cognitions and goals that stem from basic personality traits are amenable to intervention and change, with large downstream consequences for mental health and well-being. Continued investigation of these mechanisms, using a broad array of research methodologies, and extending to more varied populations of risk, is therefore critical for subsequent development of successful clinical interventions. Understanding how multiple aspects of personality are implicated in psychopathology and mental health (how, for example, trait neuroticism and anxiety-exacerbating social-cognitive schemata and life scripts interact in the development of anxiety disorders or depression) is a central concern for personality psychology today, with implications for how mental-health interventions may target these different factors.