How neuroticism can impact emotional well-being

A collaborative research network has helped to shed new light on why neuroticism can lead to emotional difficulties.

Neuroticism is a basic personality trait, typically defined as a tendency toward depression, self-doubt and other negative feelings. People who score high on neuroticism are more prone to experience stress and anxiety, and are more easily upset or angry.

“Unlike pathological states such as depression, neuroticism is seen as a normal personality trait,” explains LEARNVUL project coordinator Florin Sava from the Western University of Timișoara (UVT) in Romania.

“Many people who have a higher level of neuroticism do not have mental health issues. They are however more at risk of experiencing a higher degree of emotional suffering.”
A key aim of the LEARNVUL project was to establish UVT as a centre of excellence in this field. To achieve this, the project created a collaborative network with the University of Milan Bicocca (UNIMIB) in Italy, as well as Ghent University (UGENT) in Belgium.

“We carried out about 10 parallel research projects with our experienced partners at the UNIMIB and UGENT,” says Sava. “We also organised eight short-term exchanges for early-stage researchers and an additional two exchanges for mid-career researchers. Two summer schools took place.”

In terms of research, the project focused on better understanding why neurotic people express a higher degree of negative emotions in comparison with less neurotic people, and the role of learning in this process.

Sava and his colleagues wanted to see if they could identify some of the learning mechanisms through which people react less adaptively.

**Better understanding neurotic responses**

On the research side, the project was able to shed new light on some of these mechanisms. For example, the team was able to show that people scoring high on neuroticism tend to see new stimuli as either more positive or negative than less neurotic people.

Furthermore, when faced with competing stimuli, people scoring high on neuroticism are conditioned to focus more easily on negative aspects. The project also provided partial support for the hypothesis that people scoring high on neuroticism are able to change their views on something more easily from positive to negative, rather than from negative to positive.

This work resulted in eight published or accepted manuscripts, and open access to the educational materials for the two summer schools.

**Linking neuroticism with conditioning processes**

Most importantly, the project has helped establish UVT as a pioneering centre of research in this field. A grant application has been submitted to continue and expand the project’s efforts in linking neuroticism with conditioning processes.

“UVT now has a team of six well-equipped researchers, who are devoted to further exploring this topic,” remarks Sava. “For example, we are currently conducting a study linking neuroticism with disgust conditioning, based on another collaboration with a professor from Vanderbilt University in the United States.”
Sava sees this topic as having huge relevance for clinicians. Any emotion could be conditioned, not only preferences (likes vs dislikes). For instance, disgust appears to be a key psychological mechanism in some mental health disorders such as OCD and eating disorders.

“We will continue to build up our international team of researchers, and focus on neuroticism as a risk factor for emerging mental health issues,” adds Sava. “We believe that our approach can be combined with others, to answer the more general question of why some people are more prone to experience negative emotions.”

**Keywords**

LEARNVUL, neuroticism, mental health, depression, psychological, personality

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**Project Information**

**LEARNVUL**

Grant agreement ID: 952464

DOI

[10.3030/952464](10.3030/952464)

Funded under

Twinning of research institutions

**Total cost**

€ 900 000,00

**EU contribution**

€ 900 000,00

**Coordinated by**

UNIVERSITATEA DE VEST DIN TIMISOARA

Romania

**Start date**

1 October 2020

**End date**

30 September 2023

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Last update: 9 February 2024


European Union, 2024