

HOW TO KNOW YOURSELF



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BITESIZE

Learn your strengths and weaknesses and make the most of your mind

“BE YOURSELF”

Despite how often we hear it, it is surprisingly difficult to “just be yourself”. Knowing ourselves can take a lifetime, and it is not always easy to separate ourselves from our context. How can we be ourselves, if we’re not sure who we are or what makes us unique?

Personality psychology is our modern response to this question. Why do two very similar people react so differently in similar situations? What makes us all so different, even though we are all recognisably human?

“Personality matters because it predicts and explains behaviour.”
Barrick & Mount (2005)

Earlier personality models divided people into ‘types’, but in recent decades this has given way to personality ‘traits’. Traits are enduring tendencies in our behaviour, the long term patterns and trends in how we think, feel and react in most situations. Whether your goal is to understand yourself better, or to explain the actions of others, personality seeks to discover how we can all be so similar, and yet so very different.

THE BIG FIVE



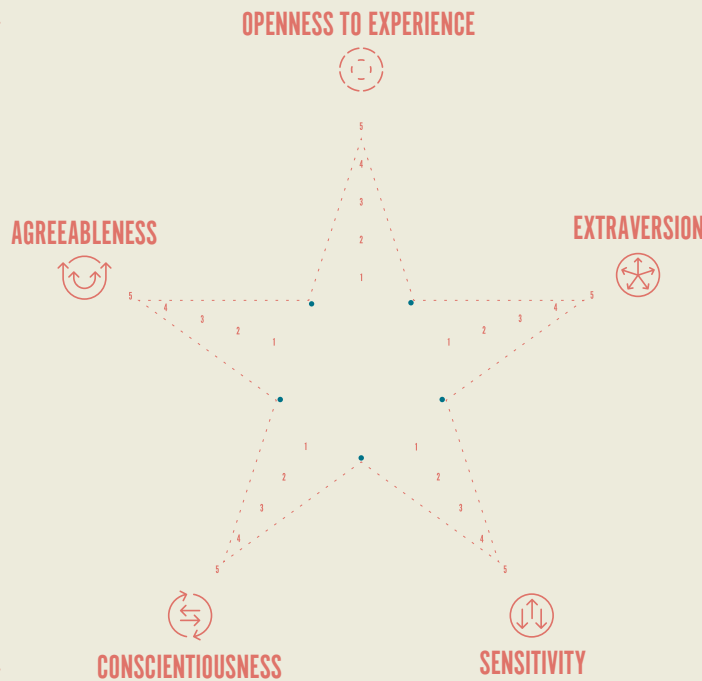
The Big Five is the most widely-used personality model in psychology. It isn't perfect, but it offers independent traits, more consistent testing and good variation between people.

Openness to experience is about how much you enjoy new ideas and experiences, and is linked to curiosity, creativity and a desire to learn and discuss ideas.

People **low** in this trait will tend to be less interested in novelty and more comfortable with tradition and routine, in work and in life. People **high** in this trait may find routine boring and seek out new experiences instead, and struggle to finish things they start.

Agreeableness is a desire for harmony, consensus and good relationships, and is linked to empathy and compassion.

People **low** in this trait tend to enjoy debate and may be more willing to upset people to press their point. People **high** in this trait may prefer to keep the peace and avoid offending or upsetting others, but can be uncritical or overly compliant.



Extraversion, and its opposite, **introversion**, are about how excited you are by social interactions and external rewards.

Introverts aren't usually shy or anti-social; they are just more interested in solitary pursuits and inner satisfaction. **Extraverts** tend to be more energised by social situations and need external input and attention.

Conscientiousness is about neatness and attention to detail, and also a desire to do things the “right way”, stick to decisions and pursue long-term goals.

People **low** in this trait tend to be more spontaneous and good at handling chaos, but struggle with self-discipline. People **high** in this trait may stick to their plans and do things to high standards, but struggle with change and uncertainty.

What we call **sensitivity**, more usually called “neuroticism”, is about sensitivity to negative emotions and experiences.

People **low** in this trait may bounce back more quickly from setbacks and criticism, but take more risks and often struggle to empathise with other's distress. People **high** in this trait will be more driven to succeed and avoid risk and criticism, but need to manage their moods carefully.

CAN YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND?

CHANGING YOUR MIND

Since your personality describes the long-term trends in your behaviour, it takes a long time to change it. Personality may also be influenced by genetics and biochemistry, especially dopamine and serotonin.

Still, you can shift your long-term traits by forcing yourself to act “out of character”. Spending time with people can make you more extraverted, trying new things can make you more open to experiences, and so on. Think about what you want to change about your personality, and practice it - but just remember it takes time.

Remember:

The key to life is **honesty**: if you can fake that, you've got it made.



WORK WITH PERSONALITY

Going against your personality is hard work. Being forced to act against your natural instincts can lead to cognitive fatigue, using up mental energy which could be better spent on the task at hand. So try to work with your personality, playing to your strengths and avoiding situations that stress you out.

Just remember that personality is not a constraint, but a guide to what comes naturally to you. Your personality is not a prison, but a starting point. Your core instincts may lead you in certain directions, but you are always free to change your mind.

This free tip sheet was created by Mindapples to support people during the COVID-19 pandemic. To find out more about our apps, e-learning, webinars, face-to-face training and charitable work, visit www.mindapples.org.