

Research Suggests a Cure for Neuroticism

How people high in neuroticism may be able to feel better.

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There's no longer a psychological diagnosis of "neurotic," but psychologists still investigate the [personality](#) trait of [neuroticism](#). One of the five basic factors of personality, a high level of neuroticism means that an individual has a chronic tendency to worry, approaches the future with dread, reflects on personal weaknesses, and in general finds it difficult to enjoy life to its fullest. Although personality traits are theoretically unchangeable, as they are thought to be part of the fabric of the individual's psyche, new research suggests some ways that people high in this quality can feel happier about themselves and their lives.

Mark Moriarty Drake and colleagues (2017), of Australia's Charles Darwin University, investigated the role of neuroticism in making individuals susceptible to experiencing general, non-specific psychological distress. Consistent with the World [Health](#) Organization's characterization of non-specific psychological distress (NPD), the authors regard people who experience this state as showing "elevated levels of [cognitive](#), behavioural, and emotional suffering that are also shared with a wide range of psychological disorders but that are not specific to any single disorder." The state of NPD can be thought of, they continue, as "predictive of a range of mental and physical problems ... and may tax an individual's ability to cope" (p. 248).

In other words, people high in neuroticism are not just chronically anxious, worried, and unhappy, but they can easily be pushed over the edge when things actually do go wrong in their lives. Because this is a chronic state of reactivity to challenging events, the Australian researchers believed that one intervention in particular could be of value in helping individuals high in this quality to cope with those challenges. Paradoxically, perhaps, they suggest that it is [mindfulness](#), or thinking more intensely about one's experiences, that could help highly neurotic people.

In mindfulness, you concentrate on and accept your thoughts, and feelings and consciously insert yourself into the moment. You might imagine that this is the worst thing for highly neurotic individuals to do, because it focuses their [attention](#) on their maladaptive ways of thinking. However, part of mindfulness is deciding on *how* to view the experience that you're having. If you're engaging in mindfulness, you look at an experience with acceptance and curiosity. Rather than fighting the feeling, you ask yourself where it's coming from, and redefine the situation as one you can conquer.

Consider what happens when you feel that you've made a careless mistake, such as incorrectly calculating how much you have in your checking account. You get an overdraft notice from your bank, and now your mistake becomes not just annoying, but costly. If you're highly neurotic, you'll use the experience as confirmation of your weaknesses, and dwell endlessly on the consequences you're sure that you'll suffer as a result, counting every dollar as a black mark against your ability to manage your life.

Taking a mindful approach, though, you'll admit that you made the mistake and acknowledge that it's causing you to feel upset. You'll then ask yourself, without undue self-criticism, how you can avoid this situation in the future, and in the end regard it as an important learning experience. You'll also view your feelings of [anxiety](#) as providing information about the types of situations that upset you. It's

exasperating that you now have to pay the overdraft fee, but why does this bother you more than, say, breaking a favorite glass? Gaining insight into what provokes you (in this case, money vs. things) can help you gain greater self-[understanding](#).

Mindfulness is a quality, Drake et al. point out, that you can have as a stable personality characteristic or as an attribute that can change from situation to situation. Their research investigated mindfulness in its invariant form, but they noted that giving people practice in mindfulness exercises could eventually help even the least mindful learn to rely on it on a daily basis. The Australian researchers predicted that, as a stable quality, mindfulness would help offset the role of neuroticism in heightening people's feelings of distress. In other words, even the most neurotic of us could manage to cope with challenging life situations by drawing on the coping strategies represented by mindfulness.

To test their predictions, the researchers administered a set of questionnaires to a sample of 165 participants (135 of whom were female) ranging from 18 to 72 (with an average age of 39). The 14-item mindfulness inventory they used included such items such as "I am open to the experience of the present moment," "I watch my feelings without getting lost in them," and "I see my mistakes and difficulties without judging them." Neuroticism (along with the other four of the five major personality factors) and psychological distress were measured as well, through standard inventories.

The findings of the Australian [team](#) supported the hypothesis that people high in neuroticism who were *also* high in the trait of mindfulness exhibited *lower* psychological distress than those individuals high in neuroticism alone. Conversely, those participants with low levels of mindfulness who were high in neuroticism showed the greatest distress of all. Interestingly, other personality traits, such as [extraversion](#), which theoretically should be related to psychological distress, did not show a similar pattern. Overall, people higher in mindfulness regardless of neuroticism levels showed less distress than those with lower mindfulness scores.

In summary, being mindful of both your positive and negative feelings seems to provide an important tool for combating neuroticism. Because mindfulness is a skill that can be learned, this study's findings suggest that (should these results hold if studied over time) the highly neurotic could find a way to lessen their negative emotions and, ultimately, their psychological distress. You don't need to remain stuck in patterns that drain your psychological resources and increase your vulnerability to moving from distress to clinically significant depressive or anxiety disorders.

You may not be able to stop making careless errors or manage every challenge that comes your way. But by practicing mindfulness, you can come closer to accepting yourself, and your limitations, in a way that allows you to achieve greater fulfillment.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201707/research-suggests-cure-neuroticism>