

Personality CHANGE:

A Not-So-Extreme Makeover

by Dan Harvey

Experts are giving ground on how much you can change without losing the real you.

Can a sourpuss grow a smile?

Can a chatty Cathy listen to someone else for more than a minute?

Is it possible for a meek mom to hold her ground against a house full of demanding children?

There was a time when the answer to such questions was a conversation-ending no. Nowadays, the answer is more of a definitely maybe.

Current consensus among mental health professionals is that while certain identity elements remain fixed, personality can be modified through effort and willpower. Of course there are limits. The pessimist will never become a natural optimist. Nor can an introvert transform into an attention-hogging extrovert. But individuals—at least—possess the capability to modify their behaviors, and that is why personality is now often described as a work-in-progress.

New Ideas

For a long time, the permanence of personality was considered a hard and fast rule. The idea was advanced in 1890 by Harvard University professor William James in his seminal work, *The Principles of Psychology*. Personality, he believed, was cast “in plaster” by early adulthood. The impact of this proposition has lingered for more than a century.

The idea that personality is more fluid gained stature over time. An important milestone in the evolution was the 1950 publication of *Childhood and Society* by psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who presented a progressive series of eight life crises that influenced the growth of personality. Research by Sanjay Srivastava, PhD, and Oliver P. John, PhD, published in 2003 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* advanced the idea that personality traits not only change over time, but that such changes occur more often in adults than children.

But while many experts and researchers believe personality is an organic entity influenced not only by genetics but also by family upbringing, culture and individual experiences, many other experts believe the basic element of personality—i.e., inborn temperament—remains rock solid.

“Temperament is the genetic foundation of personality, created in our neural pathways. It determines whether someone will be an optimist or pessimist, or

an introvert or extrovert, and it can’t be changed,” says speaker and educator Sue Thompson, who holds a master’s degree in clinical psychology, and is the author of *The Prodigal Brother: Making Peace with Your Parents, Your Past, and the Wayward One in Your Family*.

Know Thyself

Knowing one’s core is essential to making changes on the periphery, however. “Recognition helps people realize their internal strengths while revealing their weaknesses,” Thompson explains. “In this way, individuals can harness their natural attributes while strengthening their weaknesses, all toward personal betterment.”

Hippocrates classified four personalities long ago. They are: sanguine, choleric,



melancholy or phlegmatic.

Sanguine people tend to be happy and optimistic. Choleric are the natural-born leaders. "They're on a mission, always with a hammer in hand and always seeking a nail," Thompson says. Melancholy people are the naturally introverted, while phlegmatic types are stable, easy to get along with and prone to avoid unnecessary confrontation.

Mental health professionals today divide basic temperaments into five personality traits: conscientiousness, agreeability, neuroticism, openness and extroversion.

The conscientious folks are organized, highly disciplined and usually successful in professional careers. Agreeable people are friendly, express an attractive nature and do well in interpersonal relationships. The neurotics include the worrywarts who tend to be anxious, depressed and emotionally unstable. Risk-takers as well as the intellectually curious fall into the openness category. Finally, the extroversion label applies to assertive, verbose individuals who often assume the center of attention.

Do you know which personality is yours?

Taking on a New Self

One new approach to behavioral change is neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). It describes the fundamental dynamics between the mind and language and the interplay between both that, in turn, affects behavior, explains Nanice Ellis, counselor and neuro-linguistic programming master practitioner. "Essentially, it's about how verbal and nonverbal communication impacts the brain," she says. "Trying to change behavior without going back to the core is like trying to cover chipped paint with a new coat. Eventually, the underlying chipped paint will cause the new coat to chip as well."

While NLP may seem complex, the approach provides individuals with practical methods to effectively engineer personality modification. For her part, Ellis,

who has authored several books including *Even Gandhi Got Hungry and Buddha Got Mad*, offers the following tips:

Begin by defining your personal motivation. Determine precisely why you want to make changes as well as how those changes will impact your life. Let go of judgment about the personality trait you seek to change. Judgment only locks the trait in place.

Recognize the needs that drive the personality trait you seek to change. Are you looking for appreciation, acceptance, etc.? Examine the beliefs that create the needs. "If you change the belief, the need subsides. In turn, this changes the behavior and results in a personality shift," Ellis explains. "For instance, if you believe the world is an unsafe place, that belief creates a need to feel safe, which can

produce an anxiety disorder which makes you incapable of making changes.

Visualize a positive mental image of the person you want to be. Develop powerful, positive affirmations. "But don't depend on affirmations to make the change. They are only reminders of the changes you seek to make," Ellis says.

Be prepared to venture outside of your comfort zone. "The more you extend yourself outside of that zone, the more the change will be permanently installed."

Seek out environments that support the change. And avoid environments that reinforce the undesired personality trait.

Follow these tips and you'll be able to make powerful personality changes, Ellis says. ☺

What's Your Personality Type?

Psychologists and researchers have developed different personality tests that help assess an individual's basic nature, and many are available online. One of the best known is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which is commonly applied to career development. Designed in 1958 by Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother, Katharine Cook Briggs, MBTI defines people with letter combinations based on personality dichotomies: extroversion or introversion (E or I), sensing or intuition (S or N), thinking or feeling (T or F), and judging or perceiving (J or P).

Other well-known tests include:

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter—a 70-question personality test that helps individuals discover their personality type, based on psychologist David Keirsey's temperament theory that sorts people into four temperament groups: artisans, guardians, rationals and idealists.

DISC—an assessment, based on research by William Moulton Marston, PhD, that classifies four behavioral aspects (dominance, influence, steadiness, conscientiousness) determined by word-association preferences.

NEO PI-R—a test that measures the so-called "big five" personality traits: neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

