IRISH INDEPENDENT
Monday, September 1, 2025

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Does matching your workout to your personality type make you exercise more?

Understanding how personality traits influence the activity we choose to engage in can unlock our motivation – the 'secret sauce' that encourages us to keep exercising. *Julia Molony* learns more



Different personality types respond to certain activities better than others. Image: Getty

'Why is my heart beating so fast? It's freaking me out... Is that pain a stitch, or something more sinister? I'm so out of breath! I know I'm unfit, but maybe I'm also actually dying?"

As a person prone to anxious thoughts, I've found that doing certain types of exercise can trigger overthinking, causing me to trip up over my inner monologue before I've had a chance to find my stride.

Personality influence

This is not surprising, according to the authors of a new study from the Institute of Sport, Health and Exercise at University College London. The researchers have studied the relationship between personality types and workout behaviour.

Their findings suggest that knowing a bit about your personality type might help you meet your fitness goals.

In Ireland, 54pc of people are falling short of the WHO recommended amount of weekly physical activity. We tend to assume that some people are naturally sporty while others just aren't. But the team of researchers from the Institute of Sport Exercise and Health at UCL decided to dive into the details of how innate characteristics influence physical activity.

Their findings, published in the journal *Frontiers*, contain some useful insights.

Extroverts like high intensity exercise. People high in neuroticism (the fretful ones among us) prefer short bursts of physical activity over sustained effort and prefer to exercise in private. Conscientious people will push themselves to work out, even if they don't necessarily enjoy it more than others, because knowing they are taking care of their health is its own reward.

'Colin Gayer sees first hand the life-changing difference exercise can make to those struggling with negative thoughts'

The UCL study was developed around the Big Five personality traits; extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience. These traits are moderately heritable, but how much they are expressed changes over time, and is influenced by our environment and our experiences. According to Kerry-based sports and exercise psychology consultant Claire Thornton (*caoisportpsych.com*) our own unique blend of these traits define how we move through the world

The researchers in the UCL study recruited 132 participants, measured their baseline fitness level and assessed their personality according to a standardised tool. They then assigned the participants an eight-week exercise programme, involving various types of workouts. At the end, they assessed their progress and asked them to rate how much they had enjoyed each different type of exercise.

Some interesting patterns emerged between personality and fitness behaviours. Conscientious people, who are naturally disciplined, were the fittest at baseline. Extroverts most enjoyed high intensity workouts that pushed them to extremes. The traits of openness and agreeableness didn't have measurable association to workout preferences and behaviour.

But the results with the most marked real-world application related to the neurotics – anxious people like me, for whom over thinking is a millstone holding them back.

At the start of the study, neurotics were less likely to be involved in regular exercise. They disliked public settings, training sessions that had to be sustained over long periods of time, or too much monitoring. But interestingly, once they'd embarked on the experiment, they also reported feeling the most benefit from working out – especially in terms of reduction of stress.

Thornton says that these findings add to a wealth of existing literature on personality, and how it relates to exercise behaviour. For example, extroverts, she says, "have lower levels of arousal". To balance this, they will seek highly stimulating situations which will feed their interest and energy. It also explains their preference for exercise which invokes intense physical sensations, such as with HIIT.

Thornton agrees that the findings of the study have some useful applications in real life. "Using personality insights are important" she says, "and can help individuals adjust their approaches to exercise."

They could be "especially useful for those who find certain settings off putting or daunting". (I see you, fellow neurotics.) But she's wary about the risk of boxing people in, adding the caveat that the associations ought not to be seen as set in stone.

"People's confidence can be different on a day to day basis. Their social support, their environment, their past experiences with exercise – these all have a massive influence on their enjoyment of the activity and how well they adhere to it," she adds.

What's more, the relationship between exercise and personality goes two ways. "There is research to say that doing physical activity and being in sport can actually change your personality too," says Thornton. "A person with "high neuroticism might prefer solo sessions initially, as this research is saying. But maybe with support from people around them and gradual exposure, they might actually grow to enjoy the group work more over time."

Colin Gayer is a fitness coach and psychotherapist who combines talk therapy with personal training (*mymentalfitness.ie*) He has experienced this reversal first hand working with clients. "A lot of people come to me for help dealing with anxiety," he says, explaining how they respond to his approach, gradually pushing them to extend their comfort zone, while providing reassurance and support.

"There are questionnaires available online for people interested to discover where they fit in with respect to the Big Five traits," says Thornton.

When working with her clients, she usually recommends taking a strength-based approach to understanding motivation instead. One useful test for this is the Values In Action Inventory, (*viacharacter.org*). It helps people understand the values that are most important to them, she says.

The big five personality types and how to work with them

Openness

People high in openness are very receptive to new "experiences and new thoughts," according to Thornton. In the UCL study, people high in openness didn't enjoy high intensity exercise.

- **What to try:** Activities which appeal to their sense of adventure and variety, takes them outdoors and brings them into contact with new people. Think sea kayaking, hiking groups, or exploring niche group classes like Light Saber combat or Zumba.

Agreeableness

This trait defines how "cooperative we are and how well we work in a group setting," says Thornton.

- **What to try:** Activities that put the accent on building community, on shared values and connecting with others. Find your tribe by joining a local sea swimming group, or join fitness initiatives which seek to bring people together.

Extroversion

Extroverts are outgoing and enthusiastic. Studies have shown that professional athletes are more likely to score high in extraversion than non-athletes, especially those who participate in team sports.

- **What to try:** Extroverts looking to be more active might consider joining the local GAA, rugby of football club. They also, according to the UCL study, enjoy high intensity exercise. Trainer Colin Gayer suggests classes which push participants to their limits, like Crossfit, Spinning or Triathalons, as good choices for outgoing types.

Conscientiousness

People high in conscientiousness are self-disciplined, diligent, goal oriented and good at self-regulation. In the UCL study, conscientious people didn't report greater enjoyment from exercise, but were, unsurprisingly, better than others at sticking to the program.

- **What to try:** Colin Gayer suggests conscientious types should harness their goal-orientated drive, by keeping close track of their progress. He recommends staying "focused on the results" by "keeping progress logs and testing yourself every couple of months."

Neuroticism

People high in neuroticism are prone to negative moods. They can, however, be the most rewarding types to work with, according to Colin Gayer, who sees first hand the life-changing difference exercise can make to those struggling with negative thoughts.

His experience echoes the findings of the UCL study, which shows that people high in neuroticism benefit most from the stress-busting effects of exercise.

- **What to try:** Neurotics can be rattled by too much close monitoring, so should avoid reliance on fitness watches recording metrics like heart rate and blood oxygen. Instead, Gayer suggests they drop the pressure by opting for an interval training program like Tabata, which involves alternating short bursts of effort with periods of rest, and can be done either in private at home or working one-on-one with a trainer.