

We live by a set of values, a moral code that helps us define our path through life. They shape our actions, choices, and even how we perceive others. But are these convictions set in stone?

A recent study suggests that our values are shaped not only by culture and experience but also by more fundamental forces. The study suggests a seasonally shifting gray area in a world where ethics are often painted in black and white. This article offers a thought-provoking glimpse into how connected our ethical framework is to the world we inhabit.

Introduction to morals and values

Our morals and values are the **invisible frameworks of all our decisions**. They guide every decision, relationship, and interaction.

Values are the principles we hold dear, such as loyalty, kindness, or honesty, upon which we base all of life. They influence our worldviews and dictate how we choose to spend our time, how we interact with those around us, and, ultimately, how we determine what is right and fair.

Morals translate these values into action, guiding us through the complexities of daily life, from small decisions about honesty to major ethical dilemmas that test our character. In every challenge, morals act as both a reflection of who we are and a map for how we treat others.

These values and morals manifest in countless ways. Fairness may push us to advocate for someone being treated unfairly, while honesty guides us to always speak the truth, even when it's uncomfortable.

Our loyalty, perhaps to friends or family, may drive decisions on who to trust, and our sense of kindness implores us to stop and help a stranger in need. These values are ingrained in us and shape not only our personal conduct but even the very nature of our relationships and communities.

"The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it."

Albert Einstein

Study overview and methods

A new [joint study](#) led by researchers at the University of Nottingham, the University of British Columbia, and Aarhus University examines seasons and moral values. The idea is to investigate whether seasonal changes could influence people's perceptions of morality.

The researchers hypothesized that our moral compass, like our mood, might be tuned to the natural cycles around us. They wanted to find out whether the inevitable seasonal variations could change our notion of right or wrong.

Unraveling how something as vast as how seasons affect behavior and might sway our moral values is no small feat. Yet, this study tackled the question precisely, mapping out the subtle shifts in how we view right and wrong throughout the year. It's an ambitious idea, so how was it done? Let's take a closer look at the journey behind these findings.

Overview of study methodology

To understand these seasonal shifts in morality, the researchers used a massive dataset: 232,975 participants spread across countries like the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia, each contributing their perspectives over a 10-year period.

Through the [Moral Foundations Questionnaire \(MFQ\)](#), participants were asked to reflect on their values related to loyalty, authority, fairness, and care. This large-scale study allowed researchers to track how these values might fluctuate over time and how seasons influence decisions.

The analysis used **harmonic regression**, essentially a way to uncover repeating cycles in the data. Think of it as tracing the rise and fall of moral values across the months, much like how seasons change. The peaks and dips in our moral attitudes are mapped out, showing how specific values may subtly strengthen or weaken in response to the environment around us.

It's important to note that the researchers didn't just look at the noticeable seasonal changes like weather and temperature. They also considered **emotional seasons** — times when our internal emotional world shifts in response to factors like anxiety, which tends to spike in particular parts of the year. [Research](#) implies that the idea of emotional cycles acknowledges that just as the natural world has its seasons, so do our inner emotional landscapes.

Measuring and understanding "moral values"

The study's approach to measuring morality changes was rooted in the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, which breaks down our ethical framework into two broad categories:

- **Binding values.** These include loyalty, authority, and purity — principles emphasizing our social cohesion, respect for authority, and sense of group integrity.
- **Individualizing values.** These cover care and fairness, focusing more on protecting individuals and ensuring justice and equality for all.

The study focused particularly on binding values, which are more closely tied to tradition and social order. Researchers wanted to see if these values, more than individual-focused ones, could shift in response to external factors like weather and emotional states.

By tracking how participants' responses fluctuated over time, they hoped to reveal whether our sense of morality follows the subtle rhythms of the world around us and whether it's actually immune to change.

Detailed findings from the study

The study highlighted some interesting associations of seasons with our ethical attitudes, with each season seemingly evoking different values. Let's dive into what this research proposes with its findings.

Winter and a focus on community and fairness

This season heightens **empathy** and further engrains values of **equality and concern for others**. It's the time of year when the need to look out for the vulnerable seems to become more pronounced, encouraging a particular moral climate of mutual responsibility and fairness.

In those darker, quieter moments, equality, community, and checking in on one another are brought to the fore. Something about the cold seems to draw us closer; it comforts us in shared connection and instills within us a **sense of responsibility**.

Spring and summer: increased focus on freedom and joy

When nature blooms and the sun lingers longer, spring and summer bring out a renewal in nature and a renewed sense of **personal freedom and joy**. Warmer weather invites more social interaction, leisure, and outdoor activities, shifting our moral focus toward expressing individualism and independence.

The vivacity of these seasons encourages a deeper appreciation for the freedom of choice and the pursuit of happiness. It shows us just how much the outward world informs our moral focus on **liberty and individual fulfillment**.

Fall: reflection, responsibility, and loyalty

With summer playfulness dissolving into fall, the season catches up with **contemplation and responsibility**. As routines set in, nature does its preparation for the cold months, noticing a return toward values of **loyalty and accountability**.

Autumn is a grounding in itself, inviting us to realign commitments to family, work, and community. We are invited to be more loyal and reliable in carrying out our responsibilities and faithful to moral commitments.

Potential scientific explanations for seasonal shifts in moral values

Finally, the moral landscape is not carved in stone; it is a living, breathing entity that may change with the seasons. It's shaped by everything from hormonal shifts to how we celebrate and connect with the world around us. Let's take a closer look at the proposed science behind the findings.

Biological and psychological effects

One key factor is daylight. Exposure to natural light is critical in regulating our **circadian rhythms**, the internal clock that governs sleep, mood, and energy levels. As the days get longer or shorter, [hormones](#) like **serotonin** and **melatonin** are complex behind the scenes, shaping how we feel and act.

Serotonin, the **chemical responsible for our sunny moods**, gets a boost from sunlight. So, during spring and summer, when we're basking in longer daylight hours, we feel a bit more carefree and focused on personal freedoms — there's more joy to spread around.

But during the shrunken winter days, melatonin takes over while sunlight fades and serotonin levels along with it. It kicks in right on cue with the setting sun, making us **crave rest and reflection**.

Social interactions also take a turn as the seasons shift, as [research implies](#). Warmer weather draws us into the world — more gatherings, outdoor activities, and a sense of independence that favors individual expression. Come winter, though, and the social scene dims, a decline in activity **leaves us focusing inward**, developing a sense of communal care and equity as we prepare for even colder days.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)

For many, these changes are simply part of the seasonal rhythm. To others, though, the effects are significantly deeper. SAD, or [seasonal affective disorder](#), is a **form of depression** that usually occurs during those months of the year that are colder and darker as a result of sunlight deficiency. As serotonin levels decrease and melatonin increases, people with SAD suffer increased fatigue, sadness, and loss of concentration.

Cultural and environmental factors

It's not always biology that drives such changes—research shows that culture may also play a role.

Winter brings holidays like Christmas and Hanukkah, where themes of **giving, unity, and generosity** are more deeply experienced. These celebrations align with the colder months' focus on communal support and fairness. When the world is quieter, we turn to traditions that remind us to care for those around us.

Spring and summer, in contrast, bring us out into the world through festivals, events, and celebrations for freedom and joy. Think of long summer days outside, where personal expression and lightheartedness are predominant. It's powered by the **season of individualism**, where freedom feels as if it is in the breeze itself-free-flowing, expansive, and infectious.

Spending more time outside during warmer months has an amazing effect on how we relate to other people. Research shows that exposure to nature somehow deepens our sense of empathy and compassion. When we are more relaxed and surrounded by green spaces, we can more easily open up and see the world through others' eyes.

Broader implications of seasonal shifts in morality

If our moral values fluctuate with the seasons, this insight opens fascinating opportunities for shaping how different sectors can connect with people more meaningfully. By **syncing with seasonal shifts in values**, they can create strategies that resonate deeply with the emotional currents of the time.

1. **Businesses and marketing.** Imagine using winter's sense of togetherness and fairness to launch campaigns focused on community and giving back. In contrast, as summer rolls around, brands could pivot toward celebrating freedom, self-expression, and adventure, capturing the energy and joy of the season.
2. **Governments and social planning.** Winter's focus on fairness could be the perfect moment to introduce social welfare programs, while summer — with its emphasis on individual growth — might inspire policies centered on entrepreneurship and [self-development](#). Timing matters, and aligning policies with mindsets may make government action feel more in tune with the public's seasonal mood.
3. **Mental health care.** In [mental health](#), therapists could use winter's communal focus to foster connection and fight isolation, while summer's more personal focus could shift to self-empowerment, helping people embrace independence and growth. Seasonal awareness allows for therapy that's in sync with patients' changing emotions.

Our moral values might just have a seasonal rhythm of their own, swayed by nature's cues and our emotional tides. While this study opens the door to intriguing connections, there's more to explore and uncover. As science often shows us, the more we learn, the more we realize there's an entire world left to discover.

FAQ

Do moral values and seasons vary by age or demographics?

While the study looks at seasonal changes broadly, it's unclear if these shifts differ across age groups or cultures, suggesting a need for further research.

Can weather extremes amplify seasonal moral shifts?

By analyzing this study's findings, it can be deduced that regions with more extreme seasonal weather may experience stronger shifts in moral values, but more data is needed to fully understand this impact.

How long do seasonal shifts in morality typically last?

These shifts seem to follow a biannual pattern, but more research is needed to determine if they have lasting effects beyond the immediate season.

Key takeaways:

- A study explored how moral values vary by season, using data from over 230,000 participants over a decade to monitor more subtle changes in ethical priorities annually.

- Researchers found that the binding values related to loyalty and authority vary by season, while more individualizing values related to care and fairness showed less seasonal variation.
- Seasonal shifts in morality may be influenced by biological rhythms, such as changes in serotonin and melatonin, as well as social dynamics and cultural practices tied to specific seasons.

Resources:

1. [Do moral values change with the seasons?](#)
2. [How seasons, weather, and part of day influence baseline affective valence in laboratory research participants?](#)
3. [Influence of tryptophan and serotonin on mood and cognition with a possible role of the gut-brain axis.](#)
4. [Homo temporus: Seasonal cycles as a fundamental source of variation in human psychology.](#)
5. [Seasonal affective disorder.](#)
6. [Holidaytaking and the sense of well-being.](#)
7. [Nature's influence on the development of empathy: An exploratory study.](#)