

Be Happy— For Your Heart's Sake

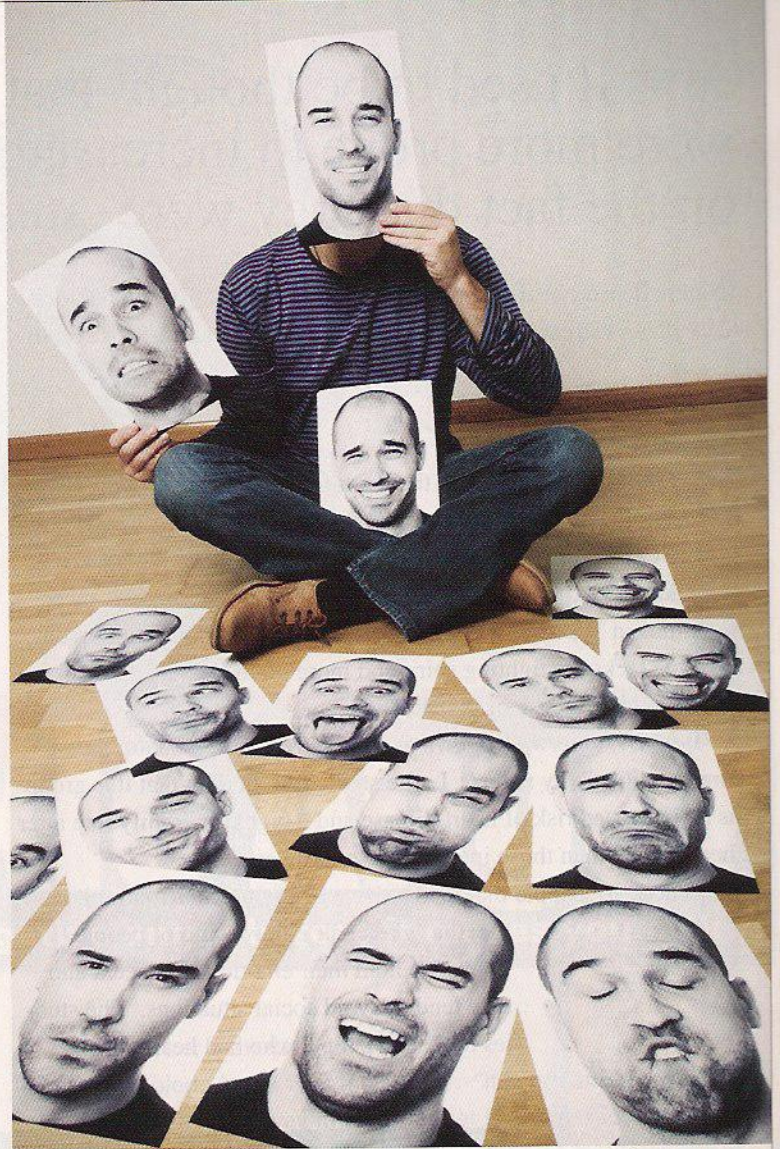
Could your personality put you at risk for heart disease?

I've been the butt of many jokes regarding my Type A personality. I'm a no-nonsense, nonstop go-getter who lives for stress. In fact, I don't know what to do with myself if I don't have something to do. I've been told that if I don't slow down, I'll dig myself an early grave. Pooh, I say, while quietly wondering if my gung-ho personality is hindering my health. Science has been studying personality traits and health for a half-century, but more recent studies are proving that a negative mind is a terrible waste on the body.

Tell-Tale Traits

When personality traits were pinpointed by Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers during World War II, they found most people fell into three categories. Type As were classified as multi-tasking, high-achieving, competitive folks, while the polar opposite Type Bs were found to be more relaxed, patient and creative. Type Cs, although reserved, had high standards for themselves and those around them.

During the 1950s, cardiologist Meyer Friedman initiated claims that the high-energy traits of Type As increased risk of heart disease, thus the easygoing Type Bs were less likely to develop heart ailments. Psychologist Lydia Temoshok looked further into personality types and found that Type Cs were more cancer prone, perhaps from their own personality traits—conforming, compliant, eager to please—that may have affected their lifestyle choices, such as smoking.



"It used to be thought that Type A, the hard chargers, were more prone to increased cardiovascular diseases based on the fact that they were stressed all the time. Over a period of time, a lot of the belief in that has been debunked by some pretty big studies. In general, there is something else that Type A personalities have: a positive nature, which tends to counteract what we thought was their tendency to be more susceptible to cardiovascular disease just because they're stressed. Type As also tend to be hard chargers when it comes to exercise and eating properly, so [original] beliefs don't seem to be holding water anymore," says Debra Carlton, an internal medicine physician and the associate medical director of clinical affairs for Kaiser Permanente of Georgia.

For Type Bs, Carlton admits it makes sense that people who are more relaxed and patient would be less likely to develop heart disease. "That was the firm belief 15 to 20 years ago," she says. "But when you line the studies up with other personality types, the

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literature doesn't bear that personality type in and of itself is associated with an increased or decreased risk of cardiovascular disease in this case.”

Unhealthy Personalities

While Type As and Bs are off the hook for having more positive and easygoing attitudes, studies have found that the more pessimistic Type Cs, along with recently created Type D personalities, are more likely to experience health issues. Studies find higher cancer mortalities in Type Cs, with researchers suggesting that this personality type lacks the fighting spirit and more often accepts a cancer diagnosis with a sense of hopelessness.

Type Ds, otherwise known as the Distressed Personality, are more pessimistic by nature. Large studies are finding that this group has an increased risk of heart disease and a higher mortality rate after a heart attack than those in other personality groups.

“These are people that tend to have a very negative outlook on life, the ‘glass half empty’ kind of people. They also hold their emotions in check, and they tend to avoid social situations. The studies looked at people who had heart attacks

and reviewed who had lived and who had died, and the Type Ds had a more significant mortality rate than people with other types of personalities,” Carlton says.

While changing our persona certainly is a difficult task, when it comes to the studies highlighting how personality can affect our health, it all boils down to attitude, Carlton says. “To overcome a Type D personality, for example, the first thing is to recognize that you might tend to be that way,” Carlton says. “Then it may be very helpful to seek mental health; some Type Cs and Ds may be depressed. For those not depressed, seeking behavioral health could still help because gaining insight into why you are the way you are could help you overcome those personality traits.”

Carlton also points out that a less stressful life is good for every personality type, as a decrease in stress not only will decrease the pressure it puts on the body, but make a person happier. To decrease stress, Carlton and others recommend getting plenty of sleep—“if you're tired during the day, you're not sleeping enough,” Carlton says—exercising, spending time with people who make you happy, and finding ways to meditate, be it a yoga class that lets you release, actual meditation, or even a “meditating” hour on the massage table. Go ahead! It's all in the name of good health. —Lissa Poirot

Personality Traits

Type A:

High achievers, multitaskers, competitive, aggressive, impatient

Type B:

Patient, relaxed, easygoing, imaginative, creative, self-analytical, avoids confrontation

Type C:

Conforming, compliant, eager to please, sets high standards for themselves and people around them, suppresses emotions

Type D:

Pessimistic, “glass half empty” approach, socially inhibited, lacks self-assurance

