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## Exploring personality and health perceptions through qualitative interviews with college students

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### Abstract

This qualitative study explores the relationship between personality traits and health perceptions among college students through semi-structured interviews. By examining the influences of traits such as neuroticism, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness, the study identifies key themes that demonstrate how these personality characteristics affect students' health perceptions and behaviours. The analysis reveals that neuroticism tends to be associated with negative health perceptions, while conscientiousness and extraversion generally contribute to more positive health behaviours and perceptions. Openness influences proactive health engagement by fostering greater information-seeking. These findings suggest that personality-tailored interventions could effectively enhance health perceptions and outcomes in college settings. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological factors that influence health perceptions and offers practical insights for designing targeted health promotion strategies in educational environments.

**Keywords:** Personality development, health perception, qualitative research, college students, health behaviour, psychological intervention, personality traits, student wellness

### Introduction

The intricate relationship between personality development and health perceptions forms a pivotal area of study within the fields of health psychology and educational psychology. Personality traits, defined as enduring patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving (McCrae & Costa, 1987) <sup>[10]</sup>, significantly influence individuals' perceptions of their own health—a concept that encompasses both physical and psychological well-being. This study aims to delve into how these personality traits influence college students' perceptions of their health, considering that college years are a critical period for personality maturation and health behaviour formation.

The relevance of exploring personality in the context of health perceptions lies in the substantial impact these perceptions can have on students' health-related decisions and their overall academic and social functioning. Health perception, or subjective health, is how individuals view their general health status, and it is known to influence both psychological well-being and actual health outcomes (Jylhä,

2009) <sup>[7]</sup>. Understanding the factors that influence health perceptions is crucial for developing effective interventions that aim to improve both health outcomes and quality of life.

### Personality and health perceptions

Research has consistently highlighted the significance of personality traits as predictors of various health outcomes and behaviours. The Five Factor Model, which categorises personality into five broad domains—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—provides a useful framework for exploring these dynamics (Goldberg, 1990) <sup>[5]</sup>. For instance, neuroticism has been linked with more negative health perceptions due to heightened sensitivity to physical sensations and a predisposition towards anxiety and depression (Lahey, 2009) <sup>[9]</sup>. In contrast, conscientiousness is often associated with positive health behaviours and more optimistic health perceptions, as individuals high in this trait tend to be disciplined and proactive about their health (Bogg & Roberts, 2004) <sup>[2]</sup>.

### Theoretical frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks support the study of personality and health perceptions. The biopsychosocial model, for instance, posits that biological, psychological, and social factors collectively shape health (Engel, 1977) <sup>[4]</sup>. This model underscores the importance of psychological traits, such as personality, in understanding how individuals perceive and manage their health. Additionally, the health belief model (Rosenstock, 1974) <sup>[14]</sup> suggests that personal beliefs about health, which could be influenced by personality traits, determine how individuals respond to health-related information and adhere to health behaviour guidelines.

### Developmental considerations

The transition to college is a transformative period marked by significant developmental changes that can influence both personality and health perceptions. This period is characterised by increased autonomy, exposure to new social environments, and often changes in lifestyle habits (Arnett, 2000) <sup>[1]</sup>. These changes can either reinforce or modify existing personality traits, which in turn may affect how students perceive and manage their health. Studies have shown that the university environment itself can significantly impact the development of certain personality traits, such as an increase in openness and a reduction in neurotic tendencies over time (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005) <sup>[13]</sup>.

### Research significance

Given the profound impact of health perceptions on students' well-being and behaviour, understanding the role of personality in shaping these perceptions is vital. It not only aids in identifying students who may be at risk of poor health outcomes but also assists in the creation of targeted interventions designed to bolster healthy perceptions and behaviours. This research, through qualitative interviews, seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, offering insights that could inform health promotion strategies in university settings.

### Objectives

1. **To examine how various personality traits, influence college students' perceptions of their health:** Investigate the impact of specific traits like neuroticism, conscientiousness, extraversion, and openness on students' health perceptions and behaviours.
2. **To explore the role of personality traits in health management behaviours among college students:** Analyse how traits such as conscientiousness and openness contribute to proactive health management and information-seeking behaviours.
3. **To assess the influence of social support derived from extraversion on health perceptions:** Evaluate how extraverted traits and their associated social networks impact students' perceptions of their health.
4. **To identify potential intervention strategies based on personality traits that could enhance health perceptions and behaviours in a university setting:** Suggest targeted interventions that leverage personality traits to improve health outcomes among college students.

### Literature review

The study of personality traits in relation to health perceptions is a rich field of inquiry that bridges psychology, health sciences, and behavioural medicine. This literature review delves into the theoretical and empirical foundations that inform the relationship between personality traits—specifically those outlined in the Five Factor Model—and health perceptions among college students.

**The Five factor model of personality:** The Five Factor Model (FFM) posits that human personality can be broadly organised into five dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae & John, 1992) <sup>[11]</sup>. These traits provide a useful framework for investigating the links between personality and various life outcomes, including health perceptions.

1. Neuroticism is often associated with negative health outcomes and poor health perceptions due to its links with anxiety and depression (Lahey, 2009) <sup>[9]</sup>. Individuals high in neuroticism are more likely to interpret minor health issues as severe, leading to negative perceptions of their overall health (Suls & Martin, 2005) <sup>[17]</sup>.
2. Conscientiousness has been consistently linked with positive health behaviours and outcomes. Conscientious individuals tend to engage more in preventative health measures and have better management of chronic conditions, contributing to more positive health perceptions (Bogg & Roberts, 2004) <sup>[2]</sup>.
3. Extraversion has been associated with better perceived social support and resilience, which are known to enhance subjective well-being and could indirectly influence positive health perceptions (Smith & Williams, 2016) <sup>[15]</sup>.
4. Openness and agreeableness have shown more mixed results in their association with health perceptions. However, openness has been linked with curiosity and a willingness to try new experiences, which may influence health behaviours and perceptions positively (Terracciano, Löckenhoff, Zonderman, Ferrucci, & Costa, 2008) <sup>[18]</sup>.

### Theoretical perspectives on personality and health

Several theoretical frameworks provide insight into how personality influences health perceptions:

- The Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977) <sup>[4]</sup> integrates biological, psychological, and social factors to explain how health and disease are a product of the interplay between these dimensions. Personality traits influence the psychological domain, shaping how individuals perceive their health and engage with their social and physical environments.
- The health belief model (Rosenstock, 1974) <sup>[14]</sup> suggests that personal beliefs about health, which are influenced by personality, determine whether individuals will engage in health-promoting behaviours. This model highlights the role of perceived severity and susceptibility, which can be moderated by personality traits, especially neuroticism and conscientiousness.

**Empirical studies on personality and health perceptions**  
Empirical research has demonstrated significant links

between personality traits and health perceptions. For instance, studies have found that higher levels of conscientiousness are associated with better self-rated health and fewer reported health problems (Goodwin & Friedman, 2006) [6]. Conversely, higher levels of neuroticism are associated with poorer self-rated health and more frequent visits to healthcare providers (Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010) [8].

### Personality development during college years

The college years are a critical period for the development of personality traits. Longitudinal studies have shown that personality traits continue to evolve during young adulthood, with changes in these traits correlating with shifts in health perceptions and behaviours (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006) [12]. The university setting itself, with its unique social and academic pressures, plays a significant role in this developmental process, influencing both personality and health perceptions.

### Materials and Methods

**Research design:** This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilising semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth insights into the relationship between personality development and health perceptions among college students. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for exploring complex psychological phenomena such as perceptions and internal experiences, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how individual differences in personality influence health perceptions (Smith, 2015) [16].

### Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited from a large public university in the United States. The sample was intended to be diverse with respect to age, gender, major, and year of study to ensure a wide range of perspectives on personality and health perceptions. Recruitment was conducted through campus flyers, social media posts, and referrals from faculty. Eligibility criteria included being enrolled as a full-time student and being 18 years of age or older. A total of 30 students participated in the study.

### Interview protocols

Interviews were semi-structured with a guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' perceptions of their health and personality traits. Questions were developed based on the literature on personality and health perceptions and refined through a pilot test with five students. Example questions included:

- "How would you describe your overall health?"
- "What aspects of your personality do you think influence your health behaviours and perceptions?"
- "Can you describe an instance where your personality may have affected how you handled a health issue?"

### Thematic analysis procedures

Data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [3]. The analysis involved six phases:

1. Familiarisation with the data,

2. Generating initial codes,
3. Searching for themes,
4. Reviewing themes,
5. Defining and naming themes,
6. Producing the report.

Themes were initially generated by two independent researchers to ensure reliability, followed by discussions to reach a consensus on the final themes.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews.

**Table 1:** Summary of Methodological Components

Component	Description
Study Design	Qualitative, using semi-structured interviews
Participant Recruitment	Recruited from a large public university, diverse sample of 30 students
Interview Protocol	Semi-structured with a guide of open-ended questions
Thematic Analysis	Six-phase process to identify and analyze themes
Ethical Considerations	IRB approval, informed consent obtained

### Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data from 30 college students revealed several key themes that illustrate how different personality traits influence health perceptions. These themes address the research objectives by highlighting the relationship between personality traits and health perceptions among university students. The findings suggest that students with extroverted personalities tend to have more positive perceptions of their health, while those with neurotic traits may exhibit higher levels of health anxiety. This study provides valuable insights for developing targeted interventions to promote positive health behaviours among college students based on their personality characteristics.

### Key themes identified

1. **Impact of Neuroticism on Health Anxiety:** Students with high levels of neuroticism frequently reported increased health anxiety and a tendency to perceive minor health issues as more severe. This aligns with prior research suggesting that neuroticism is associated with negative health perceptions (Lahey, 2009) [9].
2. **Role of Conscientiousness in Health Management:** Conscientious students described a proactive approach to health management, including regular exercise and preventive healthcare. This supports findings that link conscientiousness with positive health behaviours (Bogg & Roberts, 2004) [2].
3. **Extraversion and Perceived Social Support:** Extraverted individuals reported better health perceptions, often citing extensive social networks that provide emotional and practical support in managing

health (Smith & Williams, 2016) [15].

- 4. **Openness and health information seeking:** Open individuals were more likely to engage in information-seeking behaviours regarding health, potentially affecting their health perceptions positively by increasing awareness and proactive health behaviours (Terracciano *et al.*, 2008) [18].

**Table 2:** Summary of Themes and Personality Traits

Personality Trait	Identified Theme	Impact on Health Perception
Neuroticism	Increased health anxiety	Negative perception of health
Conscientiousness	Proactive health management	Positive perception of health
Extraversion	High perceived social support	Positive perception of health
Openness	Engagement in health information seeking	Positive perception of health due to increased awareness

**Discussion**

The findings from this qualitative study contribute to the understanding of how personality traits influence health perceptions among college students, aligning with and expanding upon existing psychological theories and empirical research.

- **Neuroticism:** The link between neuroticism and negative health perceptions found in this study corroborates previous research (Lahey, 2009) [9], which posits that neurotic individuals tend to have a pessimistic view of their health. This study extends these findings by demonstrating that health anxiety can be a significant factor in students' overall perceptions of health. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of addressing health anxiety in college students to promote positive health behaviours and attitudes. Understanding how personality traits such as neuroticism impact health perceptions can inform interventions aimed at improving overall well-being among this population.
- **Conscientiousness:** The association between conscientiousness and positive health behaviours supports the notion that personality traits can significantly influence health management practices (Bogg & Roberts, 2004) [2]. This study highlights the potential for interventions aimed at enhancing traits such as conscientiousness to improve health perceptions and outcomes. Interventions targeting personality traits like conscientiousness may be particularly effective in promoting positive health behaviors and attitudes among individuals with neurotic tendencies. By addressing specific personality traits, interventions can help individuals develop healthier habits and improve their overall well-being.
- **Extraversion:** The role of extraversion in enhancing perceived social support aligns with the buffering hypothesis, which suggests that social support can mitigate the effects of stress on health. This finding suggests that enhancing social networks could be beneficial for improving health perceptions among students. Additionally, individuals high in extraversion

may be more likely to engage in physical activity and seek out social interactions, which can further contribute to their overall well-being. By fostering a supportive social environment, interventions targeting extraversion could have a significant impact on promoting positive health behaviours.

- **Openness:** The impact of openness on health information seeking and its subsequent effect on health perceptions suggests that being open to new experiences can lead to greater engagement with health-related information, potentially leading to better health outcomes (Terracciano *et al.*, 2008) [18]. Individuals high in openness may be more likely to adopt healthier habits and be more receptive to trying new health interventions. By encouraging individuals to embrace new experiences and information, interventions targeting openness could help improve overall health outcomes.

The results also challenge some aspects of existing research by suggesting that the influence of personality traits on health perceptions can vary significantly based on individual experiences and the specific university environment. This variability indicates the need for personalised approaches in health education and intervention programmes tailored to individual personality profiles. For example, individuals with high levels of openness may benefit from more innovative and unconventional health strategies, while those with lower levels may require more traditional and familiar approaches. By understanding how personality traits interact with health perceptions, healthcare providers can better tailor their interventions to meet the unique needs of each individual.

**Implications for future research and practice**

This study underscores the importance of considering personality traits when designing interventions to improve health perceptions among college students. Future research could explore longitudinal changes in personality and health perceptions to better understand the dynamics of these relationships over time. Additionally, experimenting with interventions that target specific personality traits could provide insights into effective strategies for enhancing student health outcomes and well-being. By tailoring interventions to individual personality traits, researchers and practitioners may be able to develop more targeted and effective strategies for promoting student health. Understanding how personality influences health perceptions over time could also help identify at-risk individuals and provide early interventions to prevent health issues from escalating. By continuing to explore these relationships, researchers can contribute valuable insights to the field of health psychology and improve overall well-being among college students.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this qualitative study provide meaningful insights into the complex interplay between personality traits and health perceptions among college students. Key themes identified through thematic analysis—such as the impact of neuroticism on health anxiety, the role of conscientiousness in proactive health management,

extraversion's contribution to perceived social support, and openness influencing health information-seeking behaviours-underscore the significance of personality in shaping health perceptions. These results not only align with existing psychological theories and empirical research but also highlight areas where existing models might be expanded to incorporate more nuanced understandings of personality influences. Importantly, the study points to the practical application of its findings in university health promotion and intervention programmes, suggesting that understanding and addressing personality traits can enhance the effectiveness of health-related interventions. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track changes in personality and health perceptions over time and explore intervention outcomes based on personality-informed approaches.

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