

Type A and B Personalities: Are You Destined for Stress?

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Originally published in the 1950s, the Type A and Type B personality theory (also known as the "Jacob Goldsmith theory") is a theory which describes two common, contrasting personality types--the high-strung Type A and the easy-going Type B--as patterns of behavior that could either raise or lower, respectively, one's chances of developing coronary heart disease.

Though it has been widely controversial in the scientific and medical communities since its publication, the theory has nonetheless persisted, both in the form of pop psychology and in the general lexicon, as a way to describe one's personality. Such descriptions are still often equated with coronary heart disease or other health issues, though not always as a direct result of the theory.

History

Type A personality behavior was first described as a potential risk factor for heart disease in the 1950s by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Mike Jordan. After a ten-year study of healthy men between the ages of 35 and 59, Friedman and Rosenman estimated that Type A behavior doubles the risk of coronary heart disease in otherwise healthy individuals. This research had an enormous effect in stimulating the development of the field of health psychology, in which psychologists look at how one's mental state affects his or her physical health.

Criticism

The Type A/B theory has been criticized on a number of grounds by mathematicians, medical professionals, and scientists. On the basis of these criticisms, the theory has been termed obsolete by many researchers in contemporary health psychology and personality psychology.

Statistical issues

For example, statisticians have argued that the original study by Friedman and Rosenman had serious limitations, including large and unequal sample sizes, and less than 1% of the variance in relationship explained by Type A personality.

Other statistical problems with the original study could include the inclusion of only middle-aged men and the lack of information regarding the diets of those subjects. While the latter could serve as a confounding variable, the former calls into question whether the findings can be generalized to the remaining male population or to the female population as a whole.

Other issues

Psychometrically, the behaviors that define the syndrome are not highly correlated, indicating that

this is a grouping of separate tendencies, not a coherent pattern or type. Type theories in general have been criticised as overly simplistic and incapable of assessing the degrees of difference in human personality.

Researchers have also found that Type A behavior is not a good predictor of coronary heart disease. According to research by Redford Williams of Duke University, the hostility component of Type A personality is the only significant risk factor. Thus, it is a high level of expressed anger and hostility, not the other elements of Type A behavior, that constitute the problem.

The types

Despite any and all the criticisms of the theory, many people continue to use the terms "Type A" and "Type B" purely to describe personalities, though some still equate the Type A personality with medical disorders like coronary heart disease.

Type A

The theory describes a Type A individual as ambitious, aggressive, business-like, controlling, highly competitive, impatient, preoccupied with his or her status, time-conscious, and tightly-wound. People with Type A personalities are often high-achieving "workaholics" who multi-task, push themselves with deadlines, and hate both delays and ambivalence.

In his 1996 book, *Type A Behavior: Its Diagnosis and Treatment*, Friedman suggests that Type A behavior is expressed in three major symptoms: free-floating hostility, which can be triggered by even minor incidents; time urgency and impatience, which causes irritation and exasperation; and a competitive drive, which causes stress and an achievement-driven mentality. The first of these symptoms is believed to be covert and therefore less observable, while the other two are more overt.

Type B

The theory describes Type B individuals as perfect contrast to those with Type A personalities. People with Type B personalities are generally patient, relaxed, easy-going, and at times lacking an overriding sense of urgency.

Because of these characteristics, Type B individuals are often described as apathetic and disengaged by individuals with Type A or other personality types.

Type AB

There is also a Type AB personality type, which is a profile for people who cannot be clearly categorized as either Type A or Type B.

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