

- Mental health

When personality affects the heart

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PERSONALITY traits such as anxiety and irritability, have been linked with early signs of heart ageing, according to a study.



Experts said the findings show people at risk of developing mental health conditions could benefit from more support in an attempt to lower the likelihood of heart issues in the future.

To explore the link between mental health and heart function, an international team led by scientists from Queen Mary University of London in Britain looked at heart scans from 36,309 UK Biobank participants. Personality traits classed as “neuroticism”, such as unstable moods, excessive worrying, anxiety, irritability, self-consciousness and sadness, were scored using a personality questionnaire.

Researchers found that a “greater tendency towards neuroticism personality traits” was linked to “smaller, poorer functioning ventricles with lower LV (left ventricular) mass, higher myocardial fibrosis, and higher arterial stiffness”.

The link was found independent of the traditional risk factors for heart problems, such as smoking and obesity, and were “more robust” in men, compared to women.

The team said the findings, published in the *European Heart Journal – Cardiovascular Imaging*, “highlight the link between mental health and cardiovascular health” and support strategies that promote mental wellbeing in the general population.

“We know there are important links between mental health and cardiovascular outcomes, and our study has uncovered that harmful changes to the heart are seen in people with neurotic personality traits such as anxiety, depression and excessive worrying,” said study corresponding author and Queen Mary professor of cardiovascular medicine Dr Steffen Petersen.

“Even when lifestyle factors, like smoking, weight and age, are taken into consideration, neurotic traits appear to be linked to signs of heart ageing.”

Prof Petersen said his team will now aim to understand how these personality traits impact heart function and the risk of heart conditions in the long term.

British Heart Foundation associate medical director Dr James Leiper said: “We know that living with a mental health condition can increase the risk of heart and circulatory diseases, and this important research shows that certain personality traits – which can be early signs of mental health conditions – can lead to changes to the heart that are synonymous with heart ageing.

“This study highlights the need for healthcare professionals to be mindful that patients who may be at risk of mental health conditions, may benefit from support to help lower risk of heart conditions.

“With mental health diagnoses becoming increasingly common, we hope future research will investigate these links further.

“If you’re looking to make lifestyle changes to improve your physical and mental wellbeing, speak to your GP (general practitioner), as they can help you find ways to look after your heart that suit you.”