

Emotionally unstable? It spells trouble for work, relationships and life

Rob Bailey and Tatiana Gulko, OPP Ltd

Summary

This presentation explores a range of studies of resilience using the 16PF questionnaire, focusing on Anxiety and its subscales. To show the wide-ranging implications of high Anxiety and low Emotional Stability, the outcomes relate to both work-life and home-life. This is to remind occupational experts that emotional concerns are unlikely to stay at only home. Outcomes included engagement, promotion, tenure, happiness, satisfaction with romantic relationships, and self-perceptions of luckiness.

Background and introduction

Psychological resilience is, with good reason, a fashionable topic right now in the HR world (see for example: *Developing resilience: An evidence-based guide for practitioners*, CIPD 2011). However, to psychologists, this is not a new concern; resilience has been defined as “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Similarly, writing about the 16PF personality questionnaire in 1989, H.B. Cattell (cited in Cattell and Schuerger, 2003) says that Emotional Stability underpins the ability “to overcome the obstacles that humans inevitably encounter as they attempt to sustain their lives and meet their needs”.

This presentation explores a range of personality studies completed with the 16PF personality questionnaire, where resilience is measured by the global construct of Anxiety (similar to the Big Five’s Neuroticism) and specifically by the scales Emotional Stability, Vigilance (a lack of trust in others), Apprehension and Tension. It is proposed for the DOP Conference theme of Investing in the Future of the Individual because of the relevance to individuals wishing to lead successful rewarding lives. We feel that it has a general public interest because of the number of important life experiences related to Anxiety and Emotional Stability. The depth and breadth of this presentation collates several themes together in one place for the first time.

Over several years of working with 16PF data, the authors have noted how Emotional Stability seems very closely related to successful functioning in several areas of everyday life (not just adversity), both in and out of the workplace. Although the main aim of the presentation is to explore the impact upon the workplace, examples of home-life distress are also given. This is to show the wide-ranging implications of low Emotional Stability, but also to remind occupational experts that emotional concerns are not likely to stay at only home.

Additionally we note the work of Judge and Bono (2001) who present a meta-analytic study showing the significant relationship of 4 traits: self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, locus of control, and Emotional Stability (low neuroticism) with job satisfaction and job performance.

Separately, Cook’s (2005) Big Five study examined the dimension of Emotional Stability and explored its relationship to work outcomes. Results demonstrated that all Big Five personality dimensions were significantly, positively related to job performance, job satisfaction, and career satisfaction.

Interestingly, Cook also looked at levels of Emotional Stability for different job categories. Individuals in jobs that were considered “high stress” had higher mean scores on Emotional Stability. Cook concludes, “In addition to supporting previous research findings, this study contributed unique information by demonstrating that Emotional Stability contributes unique information to the prediction of job outcomes.”

In this paper, various relationships between the Global Factor of Anxiety and work/non-work outcomes were evaluated. The main purpose was to see the extent to which Anxiety predicts these outcomes over and above other personality factors, as we hypothesise that the importance of this personality characteristic would lead it to have a unique and meaningful contribution. The outcomes included engagement, promotion, tenure, happiness, satisfaction with romantic relationships, and perceptions of how lucky people feel themselves to be.

Methods

Data from different sources were analysed; all participants had completed the 5th Edition 16PF personality questionnaire (Cattell, & Cattell, 1995) in UK English:

1. UK and Republic of Ireland standardisation sample – 1,212 gender-balanced, representative of the UK/Ire working population (for age, region, ethnic background, etc.). This group also completed a battery of self-reported criteria questions examining: work outcomes, lifestyle choices, and demographics. All results in this presentation relate to this dataset with the exception of those referred to as 'Psychological Fitness'
2. Psychological Fitness study: a 106 item questionnaire was created to measure constructs of Helplessness, Defensiveness, and Powerfulness; 49 individuals from many different countries right across the world and from various occupational backgrounds completed both the 16PF5 and the Psychological Fitness questionnaire.
3. 9,000 US participants who described their personality on the 16PF questionnaire as well as rating their satisfaction with their relationship with their partner; this group comprised 4,500 couples.

Results

The following observations were found:

From the UK Standardisation dataset (N1,212)

Analysis of correlations between Anxiety (and its subscales) and the criteria below helped to identify which to study further with regression (for example moderate correlations included: Emotional Stability and self-reported luckiness (.285), poor health (-.320), and Anxiety and work engagement (-.259); strong correlations included: Emotional Stability and happiness (.540); weak correlations included the number of leadership positions outside work and Anxiety (-.110) and Emotional Stability and taking time off work sick due to stress (-.127).

Regression analysis showed that Anxiety contributed unique variance in the prediction of many criteria. These are shown in the table below. Further regression analysis at the Primary Factor (subscale) level, showed when Emotional Stability, Vigilance, Apprehension and Tension were the best predictors. 'High' or 'Low' denotes the relationship direction between the variables.

Criteria	Anxiety (ANX)	Emotional Stability (C)	Vigilance (lack of trust) (L)	Tension (Q1)	Apprehension (O)
Work engagement	Low				
Time off due to boredom	High	Low			Low
Time off due to sickness	n/s				
Time off due to tiredness	High	Low	High		
Self-reported better state of health	Low	High	Low		
Ambition	n/s				
Luck	Low	High	Low		
Promotion within the organisation	Low		Low		
Promotion outside the organisation	n/s				
Tenure	Low				Low
Positions of leadership outside work	Low		Low		Low
General happiness	Low	High			
Psychological fitness	Low	High	High	Low	
Satisfaction with romantic partner	Low	High			

The lack of a seeming relationship between Anxiety and Ambition led us to look for possible mediation effects. Analysis (confirmed by Sobel tests) showed the following mediation relationships:

- Higher Extraversion leads to Promotion within the same workplace, but is mediated by Anxiety (where higher Anxiety makes it less likely).
- Lower Anxiety leads to higher Ambition, but is mediated by Extraversion and Independence (both of which increase Ambition).

Also observed in this dataset was a tendency for anxious people to worry more about the impact the recent recession had upon them than less anxious people.

From the Psychological Fitness questionnaire

Clear links were found between Psychological Fitness constructs and the 16PF Global Anxiety factor, and with various primary factors. Anxiety was found to correlate .62 with Defensiveness, .48 with Helplessness and -.42 with Powerfulness: all results were significant to .01 (one-tailed).

The table below shows more detail for the significant correlations between the Anxiety subscales and Psychological Fitness.

Factor	Total Helplessness	Total Defensiveness	Total Powerfulness
C (Emotional Stability)	-.52**	-.29*	.49**
Q4 (Tension)	.32*	.60**	-.35*
O (Apprehension)	.34*		
L (Vigilance)		.49**	

* Correlations are significant at the .05 level, ** Correlations are significant at the .01 level



unlocking potential

From the data on relationship satisfaction

Less emotionally stable individuals are more likely to experience relationship dissatisfaction ($r=-.344$, $p=.000$). This was the aspect of personality that had the most influence of all on someone's happiness in relationships. The emotional instability of the partner is related to less satisfaction in the relationship ($r=-.253$, $p=.000$).

The age-old saying "opposites attract" was found to be somewhat untrue. We found that individuals who are more similar in personality to their partner experience greater relationship satisfaction ($r=.191$, $p=.000$). This was found across all types of couples, regardless of how long the couple had been together. We also found out that if one of the couple is satisfied with the relationship, it's likely that the other will be too ($r=.660$, $p=.000$).

Discussion

Anxiety and, frequently, Emotional Stability show important relationships with subjective and objective measures of promotion, tenure, satisfaction and engagement (including attendance), but also to self-reported health, happiness, perception of own luckiness, ambition, and relationship satisfaction. As such, these personality characteristics seem very important to many critical areas of people's lives.

Due to the correlational nature of the data collected here it could be argued that life-events may create greater Anxiety and Emotional Stability in adults; however, the authors' view is that there is enough existing research to suggest that it is personality that generally leads to the negative outcomes we have observed, not the other way around. This is not to deny the effect of adversity on Emotional Stability, but to point out that anxious individuals create a fair amount of their own dissatisfaction. For example, the finding that more emotionally robust individuals tend to be found in high-stress roles suggests that these roles are not creating a workforce of nervous wrecks.

As the 16PF is a measure of normal adult personality, the exploration of resilience in these studies was limited to what can be measured by a non-clinical personality measure. This makes the findings relevant to Occupational Psychologists, but does not deny the contribution that healthcare practitioners such as Clinical Psychologists will be able to make with clinical assessments of anxiety and depression.

Conclusion

Although business might expect employees to leave their emotions at home, this is unrealistic, especially for employees who are less emotionally stable. Workplace support is likely to help to mitigate against low engagement, higher turnover and higher workplace absence. The employer prepared to offer interventions such as Employee Assistance Programmes, which typically offer advice that extends to employee wellbeing outside the workplace, may find that they reap the benefits during work hours.

Effective ways to have a more emotionally resilient work-force include: to support them, ensure they have a good person-role fit, and to recruit for Emotionally Stable individuals. Occupational psychology and in particular personality assessment have at least some role to play in all of these activities.

References

Cattell, H. E. P., Schuerger, J.M. (2003) *Essentials of 16PF Assessment*. Wiley, 2003

Cattell, R. B., Cattell, A. K. & Cattell, H. E. P. (1993). *Sixteen personality factor questionnaire, fifth edition*. Champaign, IL: Institute for Personality and Ability Testing.

Cook, V. D. (2005). *An investigation of the construct validity of the big five construct of emotional stability in relation to job performance, job satisfaction and career satisfaction*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee.

Fit for purpose: Absence and workplace health survey 2013. (2013) CBI/Pfizer

Luthar, S.S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000) The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71(3), 543-562.

Judge, T.A. and Bono J.E. (2001) Relationship of Core Self-Evaluations Traits—Self-esteem, Generalized Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control, and Emotional Stability—With Job Satisfaction and Job Performance: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 2001, Vol. 86, No. 1, 80-92