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## CONTRIBUTORS

Meet three of the people who have taken part in the creation of this issue of *Psychologies*



## Henrietta Norton

Nutritional therapist

An expert in nutrition, pregnancy and fertility, Henrietta is a health writer and author of *Take Control Of Your Endometriosis* and *Your Pregnancy Nutrition Guide*. She is co-founder of the food-grown supplement brand Wild Nutrition. 'Midwinter is a wonderful time of year for me,' she says. 'It is sacred time with family for nourishing feasts and walks in nature to kick back, unwind, repair and restore at the end of a busy year.' Read her column on page 97.

## Meg Arroll

Psychologist and author

Specialising in invisible illnesses and integrative health, Meg is researching her sixth book, about emotional eating. On page 48, she explores the effects of therapy on personality. 'My experience of therapy has fundamentally changed my outlook, behaviour and approach to the field of psychology,' she says. 'I believe deeply that we all have the ability to change, while remaining true to our core selves, with a little effort and self-exploration.'



## Nathalie Hourihan

Writer and advisor

Nathalie recently set up Wolf Knowledge, where she writes and advises on topics relating to personal and professional development. After stumbling across the work of author and poet Orna Ross on creativism, she became an immediate convert. Nathalie writes about her experience of applying Orna's approach to living a creative life, and solving personal and societal problems with more ingenuity and compassion. Find out more on page 26.



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# A personality in the making

Are traits like sociability and conscientiousness fixed through life? Experts used to think so but, as psychologist Meg Arroll discovers, new research shows we are more adaptable than we previously thought

**A**bout a million years ago, when I was a psychology undergrad, I remember sitting in a module called 'Personality and Individual Differences', taught by one of the best lecturers I've ever had. In this class, we were introduced to personality theory – the crux of which was the notion that our personalities are relatively fixed throughout life. While listening to the age-old nature-nurture debate, I wondered if I really was the same painfully shy, skinny scrap of a thing I had been as a child. I recall thinking that yes, it does seem plausible that our personality traits are an innate part of us, yet I didn't feel like that same frizzy-haired girl whose goose flustered and flapped away if anyone said 'boo'. If my personality was fixed, I contemplated, how had I transformed somehow into

the bold, roguish young woman, who was now shaking with choked laughter in a lecture hall with my best mate?

## A movable 'me' feast?

Since then, seeing my niece and nephew grow and develop, I've often questioned the stability of personality. Whereas my athletic niece was fiercely independent and keenly clever but somewhat guarded from what seemed like birth, her gooey-sweet brother has always been warm, cuddly and openly inquisitive. But retrospective memory is nothing if not flawed, coloured by experiences, knowledge, opinions and even mood. This led me to ponder whether the kids were born with their personalities intact, or if I was just perceiving their behaviours in keeping with my pre-set view of them. For decades, psychological

research has supported the belief that our personalities are pretty much permanent throughout our lives. If we're precocious as infants, we become confident adults; if quiet during childhood, we're thoughtful and contemplative when older.

Whereas our emotional state may alter in the short term, until recently experts have believed that our personality traits remain unaffected. For instance, while being stuck in traffic may make an easy-going person frustrated, it shouldn't morph her into an overly aggressive woman once she reaches her destination. This is, of course, the classic 'nature' view, but recent large studies have turned this dominant perspective of personality on its head.

Researchers in Edinburgh conducted the longest study to date that has >>>



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“We can change aspects of ourselves that have impeded us – you don’t have to be the person you tell yourself you are”

looked at personality, based on teachers’ ratings of a number of traits collected when a group of children were around 14 years old. In 2012-13, the research group traced an impressive 174 people and gathered data from these individuals, who were by this time in their late 70s. To their surprise, it was found that there was no meaningful stability in terms of personality over the 63-year period.

## Me, myself and I

But how could these results be so very different from the ‘facts’ (or more correctly, the prevailing theory of the time) I had learned in that lecture hall? Before this study, even lengthy research spanned only a few life stages; from childhood to midlife, early to late adulthood or from middle to older age. However, a New Zealand study of almost 4,000 people suggested that personality develops through youth, then stabilises at midlife, before gradually shifting again when we reach our older years. This is an eloquent solution for the contradictory findings and seems to imply that personality is malleable – perhaps more so at certain points in our lives. But if this is true, how might we alter our traits?

Life experiences and situational and social pressures definitely play their part – who hasn’t turned into a completely unrecognisable beast following a break-up, or on the other hand, been able to be their finest self when all the stars align? But are we really so passive? Surely, we can ‘do’

something to shift ourselves along each personality dimension?

It seems we can. In our world of ever-changing quick fixes and neoteric fads, good old talking therapy could be the key. A review of 207 studies that surveyed over 20,000 people has shown that therapeutic interventions can indeed alter a person’s personality.

Interestingly, the type of therapy didn’t seem to matter, but people who scored highly on neuroticism (also known as emotional instability) or were low on extroversion changed the most. We know that high levels of neuroticism are related to both psychological and physical health issues, and extroverts are more optimistic and on average happier than introverts, so these are encouraging outcomes. Another quite stunning finding here was that in some of the reviewed studies, the length of therapy was only a matter of weeks and the personality changes lasted for years.

So, was my favourite lecturer wrong about personality theory all along? Not as such, because the prevailing understanding in research and science shifts as new studies shed fresh shards of light on psychological concepts. In other words, he taught us what was known then, but also to question these ‘facts’. More practically, the recent studies tell us we needn’t accept that we’re stuck with personality traits if they don’t enhance our lives. We can change aspects of ourselves that have impeded us – you don’t have to be the person you tell yourself you are, or the label others have given you.

I have undoubtedly changed over time and through my own therapy. There has been the timid girl ‘me’, the nutty student ‘me’ and now rather pensive ‘me’. But somehow, I do still feel I have the same personality traits I had as a child. However, now the severe apprehension (or rather high neuroticism) has been dampened with the gleeful experience of obstacles

overcome, and transformed into a type of resilience. The sensitivity and introversion has been coupled with touching memories of others’ kindness and compassion, resulting in a deeper sense of empathy and grounding in the world. I am still ‘me’, yet more fluid than I previously thought – and will certainly evolve again.

## Sliding-scale self

It’s my view that we have an innate predisposition to certain personality traits, but these are on a sliding scale, which can be nudged along the continuum through life experience or, indeed, by talking therapy. A foundation of nature, with a splash of nurture. I still have a long way to go on my life-track, but it’s reassuring to know that I am, like everyone else, a work in progress.

*drmegarroll.com*

## Tips for change

- **New experiences can tweeze out hidden aspects of our personalities, but don’t feel you must do anything rash that will cause anxiety – introverts could consider joining a film club, cooking class or choir to interact more with others.**
- **Extroverts can become more reflective by keeping an art journal, learning to play a musical instrument or hiking in nature. The regular practice and solitude is key to building patience and self-connection.**
- **Not everyone wants to engage in formal therapy, but if you are struggling with an aspect of life, you could approach a trusted friend or family member, or a moderated online support group.**
- **Access talking therapy through the IAPT service at [nhs.uk/service-search](https://nhs.uk/service-search), then type ‘Psychological Therapies (IAPT)’; or log on to [psychologies.co.uk/findatherapist](https://psychologies.co.uk/findatherapist) (see our Life Labs channel of experts who may be able to help); or visit [psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist](https://psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist) to locate a therapist near you.**