Postdoctoral Research Assistant Sylia Wilson, former graduate student Ana DiRago, and Principal Investigator William Iacono recently submitted a paper for publication that examined links between personality and depression during adolescence and early adulthood. Using information from interviews and questionnaires completed by twins when they were 17, 20, 24, and 29 years old, the researchers found that most twins showed positive changes in personality as they became young adults, but that having certain personality traits made it more likely that some twins would experience depression, and that depression sometimes interfered with positive personality growth.

MCTFR twins were surveyed about their personality traits, or their tendency to think, feel, and act in a particular way. Like other studies have found, most twins reported decreasing negative emotionality (a tendency to experience negative emotions, like sadness, anger, fear, and stress) as they moved from adolescence into adulthood. Most twins also reported increasing constraint (a tendency to be planful, careful, and responsible) as they became older. This decrease in negative emotionality and increase in constraint has been referred to as the “maturity principle”—as people get older, they become better able to cope with stressors and take on new responsibilities that require them to be dependable and reliable, like careers and parenting. Most twins reported steady positive emotionality (a tendency to experience positive emotions, like happiness, and to be active, energetic, and socially outgoing) through adolescence and adulthood.

However, some twins experienced serious depression during this period. Twins with higher negative emotionality and lower positive emotionality were more likely to later experience depression, and were more likely to experience recurrent bouts of serious depression. In addition, twins who experienced depression were less likely to show the positive personality changes (decreasing negative emotionality, increasing constraint) most twins showed as they became older. This was especially true for twins who experienced depression early on, when they were adolescents, and who experienced recurrent depression.

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Meet the Staff: Graduate Students

There are many people who work at the MCTFR, some of whom you do not see during your visit: the graduate students. We would like to introduce a committee of members who work individually or with the rest of the research teams to study and analyze the data collected in our labs. These include investigating neural networks involved in movement, psychological differences in males and females, the genetics of the dopamine system, and relationships between error-related negativity (ERN) and different externalizing behaviors.

A few of the other recent conferences from the last year were:

- Behavior Genetics Association (BGA) Annual Meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland
- Conference on Emerging Adulthood (CEA) in Providence, Rhode Island
- International Organization of Psychophysiology conference (IOP) in Pisa, Italy
- Life History Research Society Meeting (LHRS) in Richmond, England
- Annual Meeting of the Society for Psychophysiology Research (SPR) in New Orleans, Louisiana
- Social Science Genetics Association Consortium’s (SSGAC) meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland

Personality Changes and Emotionality

Importantly, though, twins who remitted from depression (were free of serious depression for 5 years or longer) did show positive changes in personality, almost as if they had not experienced depression at all. This important finding suggests that experiencing even serious depression does not necessarily interfere with later positive growth and development, and that finding ways to help people recover from depression, and stay depression free will help get them back on track. Altogether, this research helps us better understand links between personality and depression. We are grateful to the many twins who participated in this research for their help in allowing us to answer important questions about development in adolescence and adulthood, and for potentially helping people experiencing serious depression.
Thanks again to all our participants who make our work possible.

By: Emma Hamilton