

Is Your Personality Permanent? New Research Says 'No.'



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I caught up this week with a longtime friend, Dr. Benjamin Hardy, an organizational psychologist whose newest book, "Personality Isn't Permanent" will be appearing in June.

Hardy is young – a thirty-something husband and the father of five. He and his wife Lauren adopted three children (with great difficulty) from the foster system, and also have year-old twins. He's very accomplished as a scholar, speaker, organizational psychologist and author, but is surprisingly low-key in conversation.

In the five or so years I've known him we've had fascinating exchanges on a number of topics: habits, self-discipline, communication – and most recently, personality.

Unlike traditional experts, Hardy maintains our personalities are not fixed. He maintains and demonstrates through research that our lifestyles, preferences, attitudes and character traits are surprisingly fluid. At every stage our personalities are the result of the decisions and pivotal experiences along with non-decisions and habits we accumulate on the way.

The Personality Tests are wrong

We ask, “Are you a ‘red’ or a ‘white’?” or, “Are you INFJ or ESTP?” Hardy points to a recently published study of 1,208 fourteen-year-olds in Scotland. Teachers ranked these students in the 1950s on six characteristics: self-confidence, perseverance, stability of mood, conscientiousness, originality and desire to learn. Sixty-three years later researchers retested 674 of the original participants. Each person, now in their 70s, rated themselves on the six traits and nominated a relative or close friend or relative to rate them as well. The results: There was almost *no* overlap.

According to Harvard psychologist Dr. Daniel Gilbert, over even a ten-year period of time, *you are not the same person*. In his own research, Gilbert asked people how much their interests, goals, and values had changed over the previous decade. Respondents reported significant changes. He then asked how much they expected their interests, goals, and values to change over the ten years to come. Most anticipated little change.

Gilbert's observation: “Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they're finished.” Therein lies the problem, Hardy maintains.

How does the assumption that your personality is permanent hold you back?

The myth holds you back in two ways:

1. **You are held back by your propensity to pre-judge others based on their past.** When we meet someone we're considering for a key hire, or a partnership, for example, what do we do? We typically ask questions about their past experience as we look at their track record and ask the opinions of others who've worked with the person before. Like the Shakespeare quote, we assume: "What's past is prologue." We assume their prior behavior indicates where their weaknesses could derail them again. Granted, past actions are a data point and potentially very important. But suppose we were to test and evaluate a person on present attitudes or the hypothetical decisions they'd make going forward? If you ask about a past experience, for example, ask what they did and why in one of their most difficult situations, and what they'd do now if they had the chance to do it again? Listen for their attitudes, the rigidity of their opinions, and the thinking or feeling process that guides their decisions today. If you evaluate, test for emotional maturity and "EQ" to determine the person's flexibility and willingness to learn and improve or whether they're likely to be mired in prior habits and ego.
2. **You are held back by the assumption that you're unlikely to change.** Many years ago, advisors told my prior business partner that he was extremely difficult to work with and was intimidating to the company's employees. His response was a shrug. "I'm in my forties, so it isn't likely to change." I don't know the current prognosis as this was some 25 years ago. But for years

after my own departure, the company he led, while it met with some successes, continued to be centered around what I privately observed to be “a set of symbiotic relationships.”

As an outsider no longer affected by the stresses, a part of me inwardly cheered, as the success seemingly proved that companies don't have to follow a single model or a specific formula to succeed. But with a desire to improve or a flexible attitude toward positive changes, what could be possible then?

When we assume we aren't capable of changing or aren't likely to do so, we almost ensure that barring traumatic events (such as loss of health or nearly losing a marriage) we *won't* change, or won't change by much. Sadly, this also means the negative addictions and habits that tend to rule our existence remain largely the same.

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You can change any habit, or addiction, in an instant

Hardy talks about the principle of addictions at length, as this is a giant component of the material he teaches. I have also learned this principle poignantly from listening to Tony Robbins speak. Robbins maintains that three conditions must exist to successfully end a deeply-held addiction:

- 1. The fervent desire to end the addiction.**
- 2. A traumatic or pivotal experience that signals you *must* change.** This could be something like a young daughter lamenting that her father's smoking addiction means he won't be alive to walk her down the aisle at her wedding, or the doctor informing a heart attack victim he or she will not survive unless their diet and exercise habits can change.

3. The ability to substitute a less objectionable habit for the one you are trying to break.

I have tested this theory and proven it true. For more than two decades I had a Diet Coke addiction so bad it was the constant topic of jokes among the people who know me. At its peak I was unable to function without a minimum of six bottles a day. I made valiant efforts to quit and even made it for an entire six months one time until a particularly bad stressor pushed me off the wagon again.

Later in life – much later – I realized how often I was getting sick from plane travel, lack of sleep and exposure to children with colds. So I took an herbal immunity supplement. The friend who gave me the supplement warned me the drops could occasionally bring on a detox rash reaction in people who are a little older, who drink, or who eat a poor diet. Since none of that pertained to me, I believed I'd be fine.

A week later, in Phoenix to give a keynote address, I woke up in the hotel entirely covered in rash. It itched horribly and it even covered my scalp. I knew immediately it was due to the massive load of chemical toxins in the Diet Coke, since I actually ate pretty well. But enduring the rash made me suddenly repulsed at the thought of ever engaging with something so clearly detrimental to my health and body again.

That experienced occurred three years ago, on April 26 of 2017. I replaced the habit with several bottles of Kombucha a day and will never touched a glass of soda or artificial sweetener again.

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Who will you be tomorrow? Today's

the day to decide

Hardy points out that every one of us has the capability to change long-held beliefs and traits with consistent effort, and for the most part, at will. For example, he talks in his book about a 13-year-old girl who was profoundly struck by the words of a teacher who assured his students they could do and be anything if they had a deeply held desire to grow and change.

She took his words to heart as she thought about her painful shyness and reticence to speak up or get acquainted with anyone new. So she consciously fought the tendency from that minute forward. She spoke up, and actively forced herself to be more visible and vocal from that moment on. By the time she graduated from high school, she had an entirely different personality, by her own desire and design.

Hardy himself, with a doctorate degree, five children, two books and hundreds of thousands of followers points out that his wife had nearly sent him packing based on his earlier personality scores. The oldest son of divorced parents, he'd spent much of his youth and childhood adrift. He had no goals or ambitions and missed so many classes in high school he was required to plant a tree on the school property in order to receive his diploma. But a two-year church mission became a pivotal experience for Hardy, and set him on a course of discipline and purpose that has influenced his path and accomplishments since.

In my own case, a bad experience around a personality test contributed to my decision to leave the first firm I co-founded. It was the mid-1980s and the Myers-Briggs test had recently come into vogue. The other founder and I (the one with the rigid personality) had been butting heads, and our COO suggested taking the test. My result: ENFJ, with the "E" (for Extrovert) only a hair's breadth away from "I (for

Introvert). His result: ESTP. On paper, we were polar opposites. This explained a lot. Then it got worse.

"No, this can't be right," he said as he surveyed my results. "Ruled by imagination? Dreamer? Head in the clouds? That's not you. Take it again. As a matter of fact, I'd make sure nobody like this would ever get into our business."

I was dumbfounded. The desire and need to innovate actually *was* me, 100 percent. But it seemed clear that those abilities would never be valued in the place I was sitting, and potentially not even allowed. I attempted to forge onward, but within two years the burnout was intolerable, and I made the difficult choice to move on.

I've been a co-founder and now founder of three businesses since. I innovate programs regularly and find my greatest strengths in the development of new solutions, sometimes even on the fly and in the midst of a storm. I still work long hours but find far more fulfillment as I have the freedom to evolve as I please. Leaving my first company was painful beyond belief. But many things are far better for me now as I and those around me have gained the room to develop new strengths.

Hardy stresses the dangers in taking personality tests too seriously. In evaluating our tendencies, he advises giving more credence to programs such as the Enneagram that identifies tendencies within a range of characteristics instead of a color or a four-letter score (although in a recent column for *Psychology Today* he suggested doing neither).

Recently, I retook the Myers-Briggs test. I was curious, and believe I've progressed immensely over the 25 years since the fateful testing: My evaluation today: INFJ. The only perceptible difference in my score from 25 years ago was that the Introvert tendencies I'd considered less predominant

became *more so*.

By many measures, I'm now established as a leader in business. Regardless of the score, I can attest that my head, then and now, continues firmly entrenched in the clouds, ever imaginative. All these years later, the scenario that terrified me so badly has left me with a different conclusion: If I hadn't moved on, imagine everything I'd have missed. As I recall that fateful experience, my overwhelming feeling is not fear. It is gratitude.

You hopefully have decades of additional business decisions ahead. Yes, your personality will change in the ways you choose and allow it to. So what will you choose?

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