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The Association of Extraversion and Openness to Experience with Psychopathology in Fresh Entrants to Professional College

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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate the association between the big five personality traits (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) and psychopathology in fresh entrants to professional course, 142 first year students were recruited from a professional college in South India. The Self-rating Anxiety Scale and Self-rating Depression scale devised by Zung was administered to elucidate the psychopathology; NEO-FFI of Costa & Mc Crae was administered to delineate the predominant personality traits. The correlation co-efficient between the personality traits and psychopathology was calculated. Regression analysis was performed to determine which personality trait was the best predictor of psychopathology. We infer that the stressful situation of entering the professional curriculum is marked by a combination of decreased Openness to Experience & increased Extraversion in the great majority of normal students, and those with pure anxiety. In contrast, the co-morbid group has a relatively high prevalence of homebodies (decreased Extraversion & Openness) who like to spend most of their time alone. We hypothesize that an optimal balance of Extraversion and Openness to Experience is essential for psychological resilience. Drastic decrease in Openness (alexithymia) along with increased Extraversion predisposes the subjects towards the development of anxiety symptoms, since by focusing more on the external world, they neglect attending to their internal capacity necessary for psychological resilience. The alexithymia could be a stress-induced and state-dependent secondary trait, which needs further exploration by QTL analytic techniques. We suggest that a more global view regarding the association between multiple personality traits and psychopathology might lead to the discovery of specific patterns of symptoms which are not at present included in DSM-IV criteria.

Key word: Psychopathology, Personality traits, Professional college students