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Psychological Science at Work

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The Mind of a Furloughed Worker

Tags: Brain, Cognitive Processes, Emotions, Personality/Social, Psychological Science

Hundreds of thousands of federal workers remain on furlough from their jobs, hoping the congressional budget standoff will end in time for them to pay their rents and mortgage installments. It's a situation that is all too familiar to countless private sector workers who were laid off – either permanently or temporarily – from their jobs amid the economic crisis that spanned the globe over the last five years.

What's it like to live in a time of such uncertainty? According to brain studies, that depends on your personality type. Research shows a glimpse of how employees will differ in the way they deal with such unknowns as a work stoppage.

Psychologists divide personalities using a model known as the Big Five —openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. And people who fall in the neuroticism category actually handle negative information better than they cope with uncertainty.

In a study reported in the journal *Psychological Science*, University of Toronto psychologists Jacob Hirsh and Michael Inzlicht examined whether neurotic individuals would react more strongly to clear negative information or to uncertainty. The researchers administered a computerized time-estimation task, in which the participants had to indicate when they thought one second had passed from the appearance of a symbol on the screen. The participants were then given clear positive, clear negative, or uncertain feedback (i.e., a question mark). All the while, the researchers measured the participants' brain activity using electroencephalography (EEG).

Hirsh and Inzlicht focused on the responses of the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a brain area associated with error-monitoring and conflict-related anxiety, instrumental in regulating our behavior to environmental change. The results were clear: stronger responses were observed in this brain region in neurotic individuals when they were given uncertain feedback compared to when they were given unambiguous negative feedback.

This indicates that neurotic individuals would rather hear something clearly negative than face uncertainty, even though the outcome of the uncertain information could potentially be positive.

The results of this study have important implications for employers, as they suggest that some workers, namely those high in neuroticism, “prefer the devil they know over the devil they do not know.”



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