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Can I really change my personality or will the years do that for me?

The truth is that some people retain their basic traits over time while others change beyond all recognition.

Chong Siow Ann

I like to think that I'm a very different person now from who I was in my youth. There are still the occasional discomfiting and cringeworthy moments that catch me unaware and remind me of that younger callow self who now seems like a stranger. With the passage of time, I know I have changed, but without quite fully understanding how, when and why. I doubt if we would ever know everything about the past or anything about the future, but there are some who think artificial intelligence (AI) can predict what we will become.

Among the expanding list of AI's capabilities is its ability to interact and converse with us – which could even make people fall in love with chatbots. Recently, a laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology created a programme called Future You. It is a web-based platform that prompts participants to answer a series of questions about themselves and then builds a version of them 20 years in the future with whom they can have a conversation. According to the official website, the lab developed this tool after being inspired by studies on "self-continuity".

CONTINUERS AND DIVIDERS

This human phenomenon of self-continuity is the connection between who we were, who we are now, and who we expect to become. Self-continuity plays a significant role in our long-term well-being – bolstering mental health and emotional resilience. Additionally, having an idea of where we could end up years later could motivate us to shape our lives in ways that make good sense for our future.

Studies indicate that some people – whether they realise it or not – keep very much in character throughout the different stages of their lives. These individuals are known as "continuers". In contrast, there are "dividers", who are "consistent in their inconsistency". They feel they don't have a consistent identity because they keep changing. The trajectory of their life unfolds in discrete, even fractured, segments, each defined by its own set of attitudes, circumstances and relationships.

What drives these divergent ways of living is our personality, which is, in dry academic parlance, that "complex and stable set of traits, behaviours, emotions, and thought patterns that define how an individual interacts with the world". In psychiatry, we often encounter certain types of "continuers" – individuals with abnormal personalities whose traits have either made themselves or others miserable.

A classic example of the latter is narcissistic personality disorder. Individuals with this disorder have an exaggerated sense of self-importance, considering themselves special and expecting admiration and special treatment. They easily become enraged when others seem to have the temerity to criticise them, often turning vindictive and vengeful. They crave success, status and power at any cost, displaying what we call the "triple E": entitlement, exploitation, and a lack of empathy. Due to their lack of self-awareness, they are unlikely to seek help. Instead, it is the people living with them who suffer and sometimes end up seeking our help – as in the instance of a middle-aged woman who sought treatment for depression after years of an unhappy marriage to a man who appeared to be a textbook case of a narcissist. He disdainfully refused to consider couple therapy and insisted his wife "sort out" her own problems.

After undergoing months of psychotherapy to clarify her thoughts and feelings about the relationship, she decided to leave her husband. When I saw her some time after her separation from him, it was like meeting a new person who had emerged from a metamorphosis. She regretted not having done it earlier, but she wasn't brave enough or clear-eyed enough back then to see how her marriage had been harming her as a person. She was grateful that the therapy made her a different person with a different life.

Most of us, at some point in our imperfect lives, would wish to change something about ourselves. Unhappy, embarrassed, burdened, or corralled by who we are, we want a transformation – to be better, more respected, more courageous, and be less miserable if not happier. Social psychologist Roy Baumeister described these desires arising from dissatisfaction as "crystallisation of discontent" – when the realisation of our shortcomings pushes us to adjust some of our core values and priorities. Implicit is the hope that we can change some aspects of our personality. But how mutable is our personality?

According to Professor Brent Roberts, a psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an expert on personality change, personality is not "set like plaster" as the 19th-century psychologist William James asserted, but rather it can change in many ways over time. He has shown that with committed effort, it could be possible to nudge our personality in a direction that we desire.

Prof Roberts and others found in several studies that personality traits can be modified, sometimes within just a few weeks. For example, students who dedicated more effort to their coursework exhibited increased conscientiousness, and those who strategically selected extracurricular activities developed some semblance of leadership qualities. While these findings seem promising, their effects were modest. The changes that occurred over the short course of a semester led to measurable but not dramatic changes in personality. What is also not known is whether these changes are enduring.

In fact, many individuals struggle to achieve their goals of changing because they think it will be fast and easy. They often set overly ambitious targets and want a fast fix. Just as thought patterns, emotions and behaviours take years to form, changing them is a glacial and difficult process, not something that can be achieved quickly like completing a college project. It also requires a questioning consciousness as we navigate our life with certain priorities in mind, asking ourselves why we are doing it, what we should do, and who we should do it with. The process can be spurred by life's challenges, and suffering losses and heartbreaks.

A DIFFERENT LIFE

Who I am today has been the result of accruing different experiences and relationships in my life to this point. In that sense, I suppose I am more of a "divider" who can be changed by circumstances, people and the choices I've made. And as I advance in age, I am expecting further changes.

Recent research suggests that our personality continues to evolve well into later adulthood, with notable shifts occurring as people reach and move beyond their 60s. On average, older adults tend to become less open to experiences while anxiety increases, particularly in advanced old age. One possible explanation for this is the ageing brain and its accompanying changes, such as cognitive decline and the onset of dementia, though they are probably not the main factors. Health and social support may play a more significant role in shaping personality changes.

As a doctor and researcher, I am familiar with the age-associated declines in cognitive functioning, particularly in mental processing speed, problem-solving, and short- and long-term memory (generally, memory functions begin to decline in our 30s and continue to fade into old age). Conversely, one can become more distracted in old age and we cannot focus on and stay with a mental task as keenly as we could when we were young. Our worries about the risks of falling and facing accidents can also make us more anxious and timorous. Understandably, this can lead to a constriction of social activities, isolating us and making us feel lonely.

But maybe that's too pessimistic and gloomy. It could simply be that we change because we recalibrate our goals and prioritise what is most meaningful. Perhaps we are less open to seeking new experiences because we enjoy and appreciate familiar routines. It's possible that we reduce social engagement because we are content with our existing relationships. These adjustments may stem from adapting to the inevitable physical and mental limitations that come with age and do not indicate a degraded quality of life – just a different one that can still be equally satisfactory.

I certainly hope that's how it will be for me. I do not want to rage against the light, but neither do I want to go whimpering. And it is tempting to have a chat with my Future You character and see if he is as wise, equanimous and unafraid as I would like to be.

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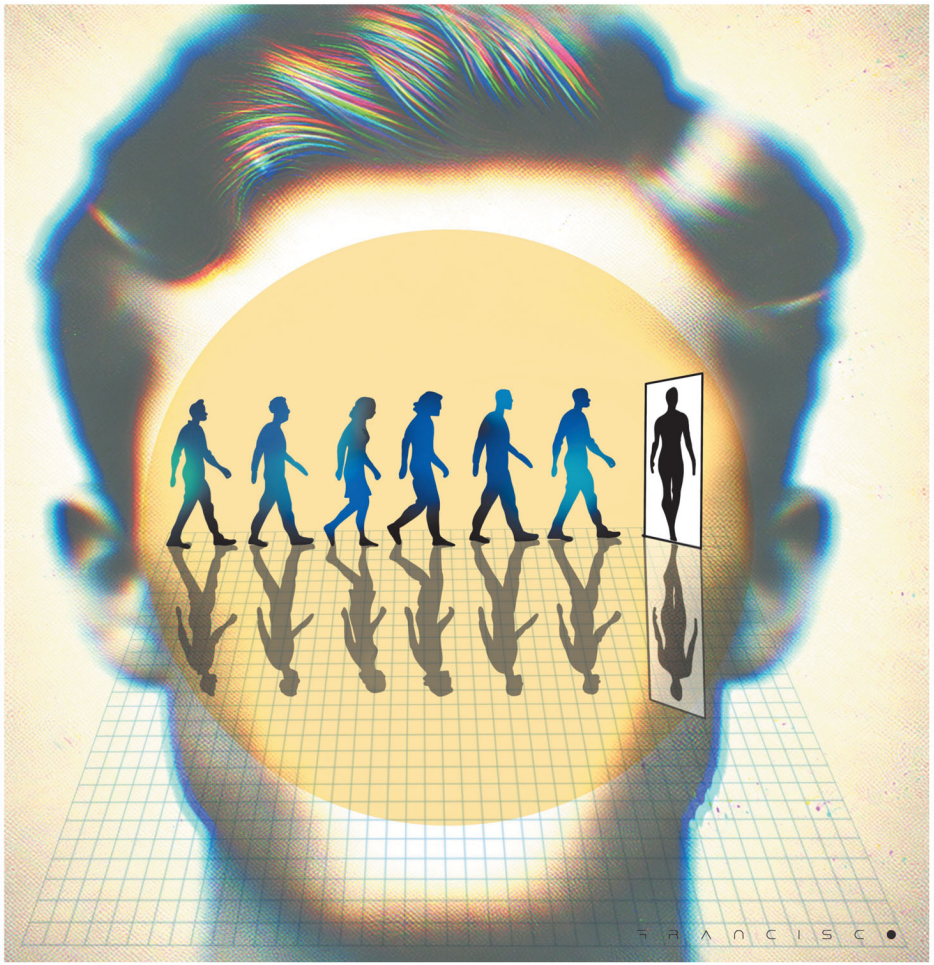

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