

big five aspects scales (bfas) background

So what do scores on the BFAS mean (DeYoung, Quilty et al. 2007)? Here are brief comments both about BFAS and about personality more generally. As a simple rule of thumb, high scores on BFAS Volatility and Withdrawal (both aspects of Neuroticism) are likely to be troublesome, whereas high scores on the other eight aspects are more likely to be helpful. Possibly medium level scores on Orderliness may be better than very high or low scores. Politeness too has a modest question mark beside scoring very high (or low).

I've used the metaphor of each of us being the conductor of a ten piece orchestra, where the orchestral players are the ten personality aspects. We want to help the orchestra produce the best music we can. Kennon Sheldon in his fascinating work on the multiple determinants of wellbeing (Sheldon 2004; Sheldon and Hoon 2007) argues that it's helpful to see wellbeing as being determined by a series of levels. Two involve others - our social relationships and the society we live in. Four levels are personal - psychological need satisfaction, personality characteristics, goal choice/satisfaction, and personal narrative/sense of self.

In this model, as human beings, it's crucial for our wellbeing that we respond to our basic psychological needs - for autonomy, competence, relatedness (and safety). If this is the "music" that we need to play, then our personality characteristics (the orchestral players) are partly important in how well they allow us to meet these needs. It is likely to be helpful to try to reduce our tendencies for Volatility and Withdrawal. We may also want to encourage personality aspects like Compassion, Enthusiasm, Assertiveness and Industriousness. In part this is helped by improved understanding of our internal "orchestra's" strengths and weaknesses. In part it can be helped by good goal choices. Working on our personal narrative/sense of self can be helpful too - for example in challenging feelings of powerlessness and self-blame. Low self-esteem is relevant here (see, for example, the Rosenberg assessment scale) as too is an understanding that there are many issues that contribute to our difficulties, so there are many areas we can work on to produce improvements (see handout on development & maintenance of distressed states).

I've written blogs about *Self-determination theory* and about *Goal setting and wellbeing* and there are a series of handouts available looking at these important areas. Our personality characteristics are important for our wellbeing, and we can change. Personality is possibly about 50% genetic. That means about 50% is "environmental". The members of our internal orchestra can learn to play better, and can learn to support each other better. It's part of our challenge - how to find out and work with who we are (our strengths and weaknesses) to serve the values and goals we stand for.

DeYoung, C. G., L. C. Quilty, et al. (2007). "Between facets and domains: 10 aspects of the Big Five." *J Pers Soc Psychol* **93**(5): 880-96.

Sheldon, 2004, *Optimal Human Being: An Integrated Multi-level Perspective*. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Sheldon, K. and T. Hoon (2007). "The multiple determination of well-being: Independent effects of positive traits, needs, goals, selves, social supports, and cultural contexts." *Journal of Happiness Studies* **8**(4): 565-592.
