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Personality Affects Your Chances of Being Attacked by a Dog

Why are neurotic people more likely to be bitten by dogs?

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Last summer, my wife and I were visiting some old friends who were staying at a campground in the little town of Hot Springs in western North Carolina. My friend Bill needed to go to the campground store and decided to ride his bike. On his way, he passed two women walking a big dog on a leash. The dog looked like a boxer-mix, and without warning, he sunk his teeth into Bill's leg. Bill was stunned, and the women were mortified. They said they had adopted the dog a few weeks earlier from a local animal shelter, and their new pet had never shown any hint of nastiness. The bite was painful and bled a lot, but not enough for us to drive an hour on mountain roads to the closest emergency room. As a result, Bill did not show up in national dog-bite statistics.

Dog bites are a problem: According to the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#), 4.5 million Americans are bitten by dogs each year. Every day, nearly 1,000 individuals show up in hospital emergency rooms because of dog attacks. The annual cost of medical treatments for dog bites (including 27,000 reconstructive surgeries) is more than \$250 million; insurance companies fork out \$530 million dollars a year for dog-bite claims. Then there are the 26 Americans who were killed by dogs last year.

How Many Dog Bites?

But how many people are really bitten by dogs, and who is most likely to be bitten? Researchers at the University of Liverpool realized that, like Bill, a lot of dog-bite victims do not actually see a doctor, so they figured that the best way to estimate rates of dog bites would be to ask everyone in a community if they had ever been bitten. Their results have just been published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, and there are some surprises. (You can read the full text of the article [here](#).)

Led by Carri Westgarth of the University of Liverpool, the research team attempted to contact all the people living in the 1,280 households in a semi-rural town near Liverpool. While they did not get everyone, they did have a high degree of [cooperation](#), obtaining information from 767 residents. In addition to questions about dog bites, the researchers also asked about basic demography ([sex](#), age, etc.), and the participants took a short test measuring the well-known [Big Five personality](#) traits.

Dog Bites Are More Common Than You Think

Here's what the researchers found:

- 25 percent of the participants had been bitten by a dog.
- Only one in three victims received medical attention.

- Men were nearly twice as likely to have been bitten as women.
- People who owned multiple dogs were three times more likely to be bitten than non-dog owners.
- Children are at higher risk: 44 percent of the bites occurred when the victim was younger than 16.
- In 55 percent of cases, the person had never before seen the dog that bit them.
- But the most interesting finding was related to personality: People with higher scores on the Big Five trait of *emotional stability* were 22 percent *less* likely to have been bitten by a dog than were individuals who were less emotionally stable.

What Is the Link Between Personality and Dog Bites?

This is the first study to link dog attacks to the personalities of victims. Low emotional stability is also called [neuroticism](#), and it is associated with insecurity, fear, self-consciousness, anxiety, and being temperamental. But why is this personality trait related to dog bites? Neuroticism is linked to a [slew of mental and physical health problems](#). These include drug and [alcohol](#) dependency, [panic](#) disorders, cardiovascular disease, asthma, and irritable bowel syndrome. In their article, Westgarth and her colleagues suggested that it is possible that some unknown pattern of behavior in such people makes them especially prone to dog bites. But they also point out that other factors might be involved—for example, anxious people might be more likely to have nervous dogs. Or the causal arrow point could even point the other direction, and having been bitten by a dog could *make* people more [fearful](#) and anxious.

Whatever the reason, the results are fascinating and provocative. And while it is not much consolation to my (emotionally stable) friend Bill, they suggest that dog bites could be a lot more common than we think.

References

Westgarth C, Brooke M, & Christley RM (2018) How many people have been bitten by dogs? A cross-sectional survey of prevalence, incidence and factors associated with dog bites in a UK community *J Epidemiol Community Health* Published Online First: 01 February 2018. doi: 10.1136/jech-2017-209330 .