

Article

Associations Between Big Five Personality Traits and Psychological Well-Being Among Polish Medical Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: Medical training is characterized by high academic demands, repeated performance evaluation, and sustained exposure to emotionally demanding situations. Although medical student distress has been widely investigated, fewer studies have examined how broad personality traits relate to multidimensional, eudaimonic psychological well-being (PWB), particularly in Central and Eastern European medical student populations. This study examined associations between Big Five personality traits and Ryff's PWB dimensions among Polish medical students. **Methods:** A cross-sectional, anonymous paper-and-pencil survey was conducted among 169 Polish medical students. Personality was assessed using the Polish adaptation of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), and PWB was measured using the 84-item Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales. Descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, normality checks, and bivariate Spearman correlations were used. **Results:** The global PWB total score was 352.69 (SD = 45.55; observed range 235–450). Among PWB domains, the highest mean score was observed for personal growth (M = 62.86, SD = 8.04), followed by purpose in life (M = 61.76, SD = 10.31), positive relations with others (M = 61.25, SD = 10.94), self-acceptance (M = 57.00, SD = 11.67), autonomy (M = 55.85, SD = 10.58), and environmental mastery (M = 53.97, SD = 10.03). Internal consistency was acceptable to excellent for all PWBS domains (Cronbach's alpha = 0.796–0.906). Neuroticism was negatively associated with all PWB domains, most strongly with environmental mastery ($\rho = -0.620$) and self-acceptance ($\rho = -0.618$). Conscientiousness was strongly positively associated with environmental mastery ($\rho = 0.627$) and purpose in life ($\rho = 0.570$). Extraversion showed positive associations with self-acceptance, positive relations, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Openness was positively associated with personal growth and negatively associated with environmental mastery, whereas Agreeableness was positively associated with self-acceptance, positive relations, and personal growth, but negatively associated with autonomy. **Conclusions:** Big Five traits showed domain-specific associations with PWB among Polish medical students. The findings support a differentiated, trait-informed perspective on student well-being, but the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Future longitudinal and multi-center studies should clarify temporal relationships and evaluate whether universal or optional well-being supports are differentially useful for students with distinct personality profiles.



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1. Introduction

Psychological well-being (PWB) has become a core priority for higher education and public health, particularly in student populations exposed to sustained academic pressure and psychosocial demands [1–5]. Beyond the absence of disorder, contemporary conceptualizations treat well-being as positive functioning across emotional, psychological, and social domains [1–5]. This distinction is important in medical education, where students are not only expected to avoid distress, but also to develop purpose, self-acceptance, autonomy, resilience, reflective capacity, and constructive relationships within a demanding learning environment [6–11].

Medical students represent a particularly relevant group for research on well-being because they face cumulative stressors linked to workload, frequent examination, high performance expectations, competitive learning climates, and progressive exposure to clinical uncertainty and suffering [6–11]. Previous studies have extensively documented stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and burnout in this population [6–11]. However, the extensive literature on distress also means that originality requires moving beyond documenting vulnerability alone. A more specific question concerns the individual characteristics associated with preserved or differentiated positive functioning in students exposed to similar educational demands.

Personality traits from the Five-Factor Model—Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness—are broad dispositions shaping affect, cognition, motivation, and behavior [12–17]. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that personality traits are meaningfully related to subjective and psychological well-being, with lower Neuroticism and higher Extraversion and Conscientiousness often showing the most consistent associations [4,5,11,17]. At the same time, the strength and direction of associations may depend on the well-being dimension under consideration and on the population studied.

In medical education, personality may be associated not only with affective well-being, but also with stress appraisal, study organization, coping style, help-seeking, social connectedness, and the ability to sustain purpose during demanding training [18–22]. Recent evidence has extended this perspective by linking Big Five traits to workplace performance among final-year medical students and by examining the roles of personality and coping in medical students' psychological well-being [23,24]. Nevertheless, focused analyses of how the Big Five relate to Ryff's multidimensional PWB model among medical students remain relatively scarce, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ryff's model conceptualizes PWB as eudaimonic functioning across six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, and self-acceptance [2,3,5–9]. This framework is well-suited to medical education because it captures domains that map onto core developmental tasks of medical training: forming professional identity, tolerating uncertainty, developing self-regulation, working in teams, recovering from mistakes, and maintaining meaning in a long educational pathway.

The present study addressed this gap by examining associations between Big Five personality traits and Ryff's PWB dimensions in a sample of Polish medical students using Polish versions of the NEO-FFI and Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales [16,25–27]. The revised analytic strategy focuses on descriptive statistics, internal consistency, and bivariate

associations. This approach was selected to align the analysis with the cross-sectional design and to avoid overinterpretation of predictive or causal relations.

The primary objective was to examine the pattern of associations between Big Five personality traits and global and domain-specific PWB among Polish medical students. Given prior evidence, we expected Neuroticism to show predominantly negative associations with PWB domains, whereas Extraversion and Conscientiousness were expected to show predominantly positive associations. Associations involving Agreeableness and Openness were treated as exploratory and domain-specific. Because the study was cross-sectional, all objectives were framed in terms of associations rather than causal prediction.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Study Design

A cross-sectional, anonymous paper-and-pencil survey was conducted at Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poland, between October 2025 and February 2026. The target population comprised students enrolled in the medical program. Participation was voluntary and uncompensated.

Students were invited through brief announcements during teaching activities and/or university communication channels. Inclusion criteria were enrolment in the medical program, age of at least 18 years, and consent to participate. Exclusion criteria were exchange student status, to ensure cohort homogeneity, and questionnaires with more than 10% missing responses. The final analytic sample comprised 169 students. The exported analytic dataset contained no missing values for the variables reported here.

The study followed institutional regulations for anonymous, non-interventional surveys. The Bioethics Committee at Poznan University of Medical Sciences waived the requirement for formal ethics approval and written informed consent, given the survey's anonymous, non-interventional nature and the absence of experimental procedures.

2.2. Measures

Personality traits. Personality was assessed using the Polish adaptation of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), which measures Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness [12,13,16,17]. Each domain consists of 12 items. Standard scoring, including reverse-keyed items, was applied. Raw total scores were used in the analyses to preserve metric variance.

Psychological well-being. PWB was measured using the Polish 84-item version of the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scales, covering self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth [2,3,5–9,18]. Each domain consists of 14 items scored from 1 to 6. The global PWB score was computed as the sum of the six domain scores. Higher scores indicate higher well-being.

Reliability. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha for each NEO-FFI and PWBS domain and for the full item sets. NEO-FFI domain-level alpha coefficients ranged from 0.502 for Openness to 0.872 for Conscientiousness. PWBS domain-level alpha coefficients ranged from 0.796 for Personal growth to 0.906 for Self-acceptance. The full PWBS item set showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.952).

2.3. Procedure and Data Handling

Participants received brief written or oral information about the study aims and were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and unrelated to academic evaluation. Questionnaires were completed in paper format and returned without identifying information.

Negatively worded items were reverse-scored before scale scores were calculated. Missing data were inspected at the item and scale levels. The final exported dataset used for the present analyses contained 169 complete cases and no missing values for the variables reported in the descriptive and correlational analyses.

Potential sources of bias were addressed through anonymous data collection and voluntary participation. Nonetheless, self-report, convenience sampling, and single-institution recruitment remain important limitations and are discussed below.

2.4. Statistical Analysis

Analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Descriptive statistics included mean, standard deviation, median, observed minimum and maximum, and quartiles. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha.

Distributional assumptions were assessed using the Shapiro–Wilk test, histogram, Q-Q plot, and skewness/kurtosis values. Approximate normality was considered plausible when Shapiro–Wilk p -values were non-significant and when absolute skewness and kurtosis values did not indicate marked asymmetry or tail departure. Because several variables showed deviations from normality and the scale scores were derived from ordinal questionnaire items, Spearman's rank correlation was used as the primary bivariate association measure.

Correlations were reported with two-sided p -values and 95% confidence intervals. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (two-sided).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The final analytic sample included 169 medical students. The analytic dataset contained no missing values for the variables reported here. The descriptive statistics for NEO-FFI and PWBS scores, along with the domain-level reliability coefficients, are presented in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency of NEO-FFI personality traits and Ryff PWBS scores.

Instrument	Scale/Domain	α	M	SD	Median	Min	Max	Q1	Q3
NEO-FFI	Neuroticism	0.856	37.99	8.91	39	16	58	31	45
NEO-FFI	Extraversion	0.777	38.84	6.70	39	17	52	35	43
NEO-FFI	Openness	0.502	40.44	5.23	40	29	52	37	44
NEO-FFI	Agreeableness	0.788	41.79	6.47	42	26	56	38	47
NEO-FFI	Conscientiousness	0.872	43.00	8.12	44	18	59	37	49
PWBS	Self-acceptance	0.906	57.00	11.67	58	25	80	49	64
PWBS	Positive relations with others	0.880	61.25	10.94	61	33	82	53	69
PWBS	Autonomy	0.876	55.85	10.58	56	27	80	49	64
PWBS	Environmental mastery	0.845	53.97	10.03	54	27	77	47	61
PWBS	Purpose in life	0.865	61.76	10.31	63	25	84	55	69
PWBS	Personal growth	0.796	62.86	8.04	64	34	83	57	67
PWBS	Global PWB total	0.952	352.69	45.55	354	235	450	321	385

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. The full PWBS item set showed $\alpha = 0.952$. The full NEO-FFI item set showed $\alpha = 0.727$.

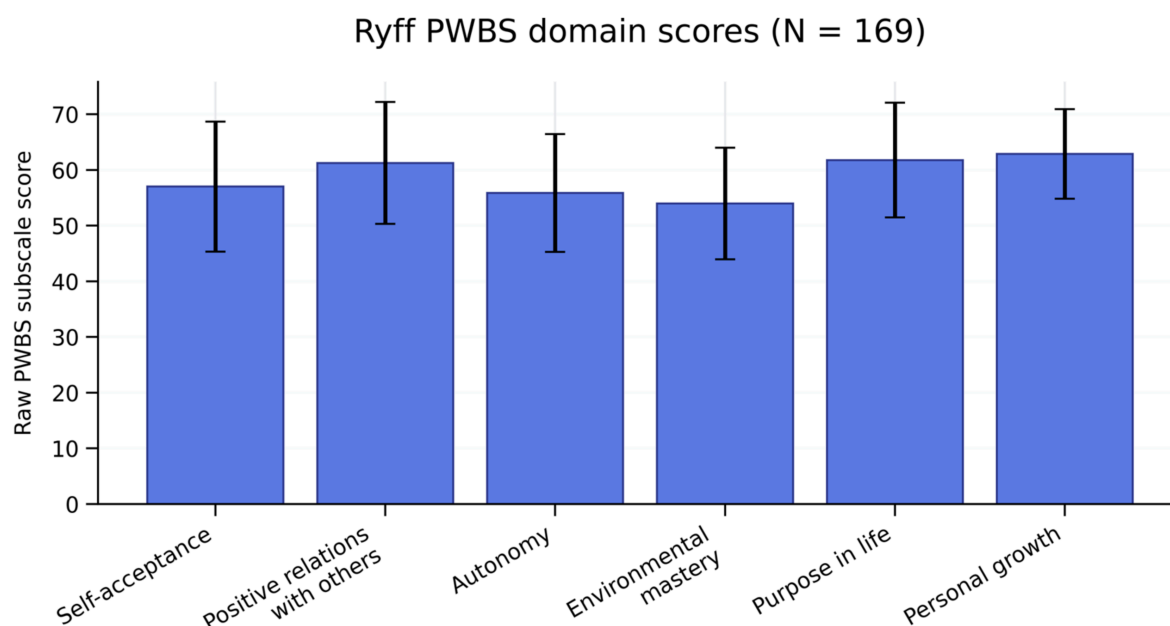


Figure 1. Descriptive profile of Ryff PWBS domain scores.

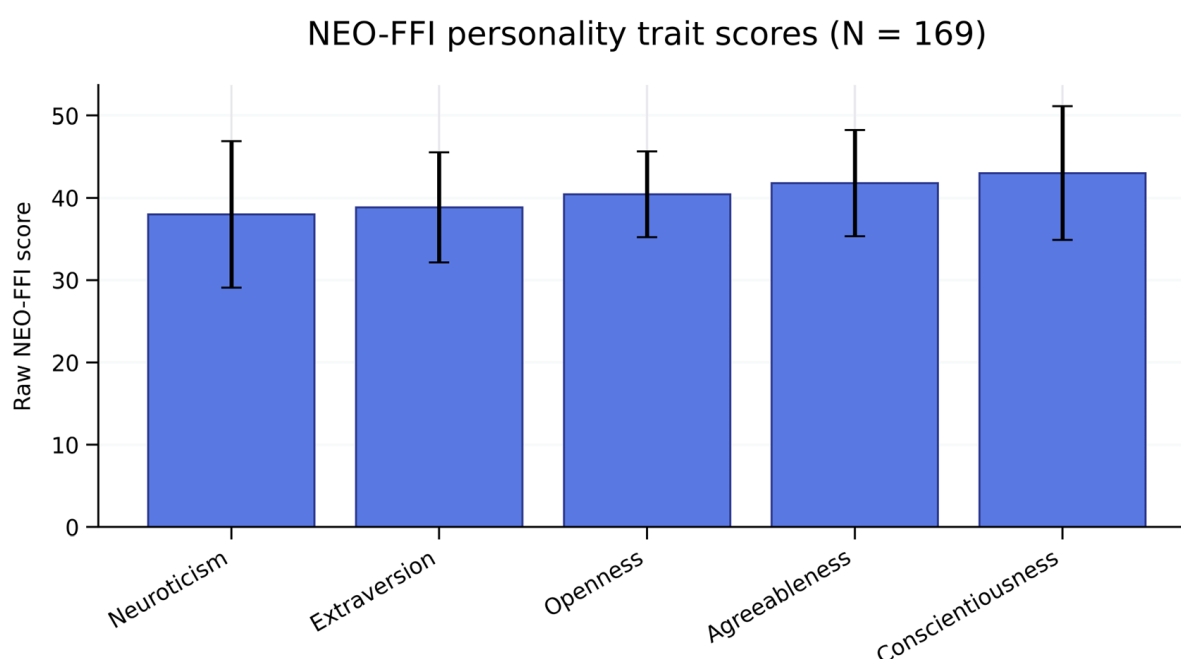


Figure 2. Descriptive profile of NEO-FFI personality trait scores.

Among NEO-FFI traits, the highest mean score was observed for Conscientiousness, followed by Agreeableness, Openness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism. Among PWB domains, the highest mean score was observed for Personal growth, followed by Purpose in life and Positive relations with others. The lowest mean score was observed for Environmental mastery. The global PWB total score was 352.69 (SD = 45.55).

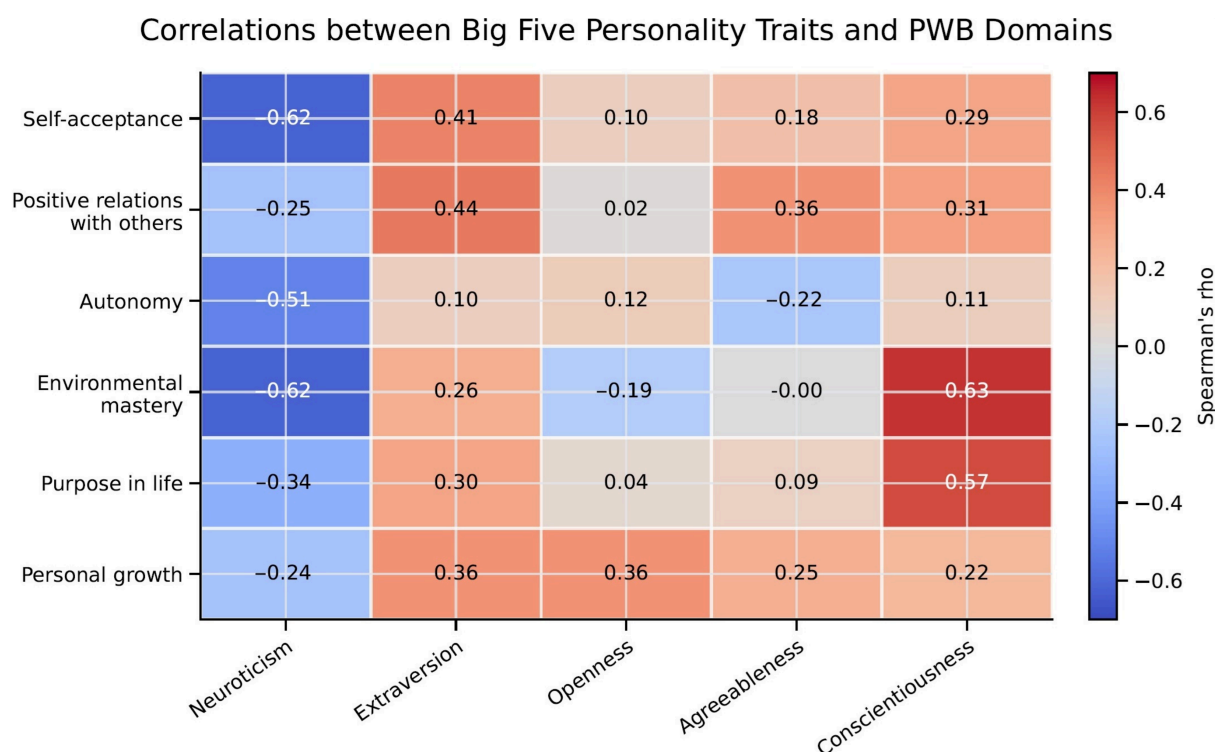
3.2. Correlational Findings

The bivariate analyses showed a differentiated pattern of associations between Big Five traits and PWB domains. Table 2 presents the Spearman correlation matrix with *p*-values, and Figure 3 provides a graphical heatmap of the same pattern.

Table 2. Spearman correlations between Big Five traits and PWB domains.

PWB Domain	Neuroticism	Extraversion	Openness	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
Self-acceptance	0.618 (<0.001)	0.407 (<0.001)	0.098 (0.207)	0.181 (0.019)	0.291 (<0.001)
Positive relations with others	−0.251 (0.001)	0.441 (<0.001)	0.016 (0.834)	0.362 (<0.001)	0.315 (<0.001)
Autonomy	−0.509 (<0.001)	0.099 (0.201)	0.122 (0.114)	−0.220 (0.004)	0.106 (0.171)
Environmental mastery	−0.620 (<0.001)	0.264 (<0.001)	−0.190 (0.013)	−0.001 (0.991)	0.627 (<0.001)
Purpose in life	−0.337 (<0.001)	0.298 (<0.001)	0.041 (0.599)	0.089 (0.250)	0.570 (<0.001)
Personal growth	−0.242 (0.002)	0.362 (<0.001)	0.362 (<0.001)	0.252 (<0.001)	0.221 (0.004)

Note. Values are Spearman's rho with two-sided *p*-values in parentheses.

**Figure 3.** Heatmap of Spearman correlations between Big Five personality traits and PWB domains.

Neuroticism was negatively associated with all six PWB domains. The strongest associations were observed for environmental mastery ($\rho = -0.620$, $p < 0.001$), self-acceptance ($\rho = -0.618$, $p < 0.001$), and autonomy ($\rho = -0.509$, $p < 0.001$).

Extraversion was positively associated with self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth, but not significantly associated with autonomy. Conscientiousness was positively associated with self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth, with the strongest associations observed for environmental mastery and purpose in life.

Agreeableness showed positive associations with self-acceptance, positive relations with others, and personal growth, but a negative association with autonomy. Openness was positively associated with personal growth and negatively associated with environmental mastery, while its associations with the remaining domains were not statistically significant. All details are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Full bivariate Spearman correlation estimates with 95% confidence intervals and *p*-values.

PWB Domain	Trait	rho	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Self-acceptance	Neuroticism	−0.618	−0.704 to −0.515	<0.001
Self-acceptance	Extraversion	0.407	0.272 to 0.525	<0.001
Self-acceptance	Openness	0.098	−0.054 to 0.245	0.207
Self-acceptance	Agreeableness	0.181	0.031 to 0.323	0.019
Self-acceptance	Conscientiousness	0.291	0.147 to 0.424	<0.001
Positive relations with others	Neuroticism	−0.251	−0.387 to −0.104	0.001
Positive relations with others	Extraversion	0.441	0.310 to 0.555	<0.001
Positive relations with others	Openness	0.016	−0.135 to 0.167	0.834
Positive relations with others	Agreeableness	0.362	0.223 to 0.486	<0.001
Positive relations with others	Conscientiousness	0.315	0.172 to 0.445	<0.001
Autonomy	Neuroticism	−0.509	−0.613 to −0.388	<0.001
Autonomy	Extraversion	0.099	−0.053 to 0.246	0.201
Autonomy	Openness	0.122	−0.029 to 0.268	0.114
Autonomy	Agreeableness	−0.220	−0.359 to −0.072	0.004
Autonomy	Conscientiousness	0.106	−0.046 to 0.253	0.171
Environmental mastery	Neuroticism	−0.620	−0.705 to −0.517	<0.001
Environmental mastery	Extraversion	0.264	0.118 to 0.399	<0.001
Environmental mastery	Openness	−0.190	−0.331 to −0.040	0.013
Environmental mastery	Agreeableness	−0.001	−0.152 to 0.150	0.991
Environmental mastery	Conscientiousness	0.627	0.525 to 0.710	<0.001
Purpose in life	Neuroticism	−0.337	−0.464 to −0.196	<0.001
Purpose in life	Extraversion	0.298	0.154 to 0.430	<0.001
Purpose in life	Openness	0.041	−0.111 to 0.191	0.599
Purpose in life	Agreeableness	0.089	−0.063 to 0.237	0.250
Purpose in life	Conscientiousness	0.570	0.458 to 0.664	<0.001
Personal growth	Neuroticism	−0.242	−0.379 to −0.094	0.002
Personal growth	Extraversion	0.362	0.223 to 0.486	<0.001
Personal growth	Openness	0.362	0.223 to 0.486	<0.001
Personal growth	Agreeableness	0.252	0.105 to 0.388	<0.001
Personal growth	Conscientiousness	0.221	0.072 to 0.360	0.004

3.3. Pattern Synthesis Across PWB Facets

The correlational profile indicates that the relationship between personality and PWB was domain-specific rather than uniform across all well-being facets. The PWBS scoring showed a consistent inverse association between Neuroticism and every PWB domain. This pattern is coherent, as higher negative affectivity and stress reactivity may co-occur with lower self-acceptance, lower perceived environmental mastery, weaker sense of autonomy, and lower perceived positive functioning.

Conscientiousness showed its strongest associations with environmental mastery and purpose in life, consistent with the conceptual overlap between self-organization, goal orientation, persistence, and perceived control over academic and everyday demands. Extraversion was most strongly associated with positive relations and self-acceptance, but also showed positive associations with environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Openness showed a selective pattern, being positively associated with personal growth but negatively associated with environmental mastery. Agreeableness was positively associated with relational and self-evaluative domains, but negatively associated with autonomy, which may reflect a tension between interpersonal accommodation and independent self-direction.

4. Discussion

This study examined associations between Big Five personality traits and multidimensional psychological well-being among Polish medical students. The analysis, based on item-level scoring, descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and Spearman correlations, showed that personality traits were associated with several PWB domains.

The most robust finding was the consistent negative association between Neuroticism and all PWB domains. The strongest associations were observed for environmental mastery and self-acceptance, followed by autonomy. These results align with prior literature linking Neuroticism to negative affectivity, stress sensitivity, self-critical evaluation, and lower psychological well-being [11,17,20]. In the context of medical education, students with higher emotional reactivity may perceive academic and interpersonal demands as more difficult to manage, which may be reflected in lower environmental mastery and lower self-acceptance. Because this study was cross-sectional, however, these findings should be interpreted as co-occurring patterns rather than evidence of causal effects.

Conscientiousness was strongly associated with environmental mastery and purpose in life. This pattern is consistent with the idea that goal orientation, persistence, and self-organization may support perceived control and direction during demanding medical training. The association with environmental mastery is particularly relevant in medical education, where students are expected to manage complex schedules, examination pressure, and progressive clinical responsibilities.

Extraversion was positively associated with several domains, especially positive relations, self-acceptance, and personal growth. This finding supports the view that social approach, positive affectivity, and interpersonal engagement may be linked not only to relational well-being but also to broader aspects of eudaimonic functioning. At the same time, the absence of a significant association with autonomy suggests that socially oriented functioning does not necessarily overlap with perceived independent self-direction.

Agreeableness showed positive associations with self-acceptance, positive relations, and personal growth, but a negative association with autonomy. This mixed pattern may reflect the dual role of interpersonal orientation: cooperativeness and concern for others may support social connectedness, but high interpersonal accommodation may also coincide with lower perceived independence in decision-making. Openness was positively associated with personal growth, consistent with its theoretical links to curiosity, flexibility, and openness to new experiences. The negative association between Openness and environmental mastery was smaller and should be interpreted cautiously, but it may suggest that exploratory or reflective tendencies do not always translate into perceived control over routine academic demands.

From a medical education perspective, the findings support a differentiated, trait-informed view of student well-being. The results do not justify personality-based selection or labeling. Instead, they suggest that low-stakes self-reflection and universal well-being supports may be useful. These supports may include emotion regulation, adaptive standards, time management, planning, peer communication, reflective practice, and help-seeking.

Recent evidence on medical student well-being interventions suggests that mindfulness-based and broader mental health programs may help some students, although the quality and consistency of evidence remain variable [28,29]. Therefore, practical recommendations should be framed cautiously. Trait-informed prevention should complement, not replace, improvements in the learning environment, assessment design, and institutional support systems.

Environmental design remains essential. Predictable schedules, transparent expectations, calibrated assessment density, and psychologically safe teaching environments may support well-being across personality profiles. This systemic perspective prevents

overemphasis on students' individual dispositions and recognizes that well-being emerges from the interaction between students and educational contexts.

4.1. Comparison with Prior Evidence

The observed negative associations between Neuroticism and all PWB domains are consistent with broader evidence showing that Neuroticism is among the strongest personality correlates of lower subjective and psychological well-being [11,17,20]. The positive associations of Conscientiousness and Extraversion with several PWB domains are also broadly consistent with prior work, although the present findings highlight that these associations differ across Ryff dimensions rather than forming a single undifferentiated well-being profile.

Recent studies in medical education have also highlighted the importance of personality traits for student functioning. For example, Big Five traits have been associated with workplace performance and supervision levels among final-year medical students, while mixed-methods research has linked personality and coping with medical student psychological well-being [23,24]. The present study adds to this literature by focusing on eudaimonic PWB in a Polish medical student sample and by reporting domain-level reliability and domain-specific association patterns.

4.2. Strengths, Limitations, and Risk of Bias

Strengths of this study include the use of established instruments and the focus on multidimensional positive functioning rather than distress alone. Reporting domain-level reliability coefficients further strengthens the transparency of the psychometric information provided in the manuscript.

Several limitations should be noted. First, this was a single-institution study with a non-random sample, which limits generalisability. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and cannot establish temporal directionality. Third, all measures were self-reported and may be influenced by response style or transient states. Fourth, although domain-level reliability was adequate to excellent for PWBS and generally acceptable for most NEO-FFI domains, the Openness alpha coefficient was lower than desirable and findings involving this trait should be interpreted cautiously.

Potential sources of bias include selection bias due to voluntary participation, information bias from self-report, and residual confounding from unmeasured factors such as year of study, socioeconomic status, academic load, social support, resilience, perfectionism, and clinical exposure. Future studies should incorporate these variables and use longitudinal, multi-center designs.

4.3. Practical Implications for Medical Schools

The findings suggest that medical schools may benefit from a differentiated approach to well-being support. Personality-informed support should be non-stigmatizing, formative, and optional. It should help students understand their own coping tendencies rather than categorizing them as "at risk" based on trait levels.

Universal curricular elements may include training in emotion regulation, adaptive standards, time management, planning, reflective practice, peer communication, and help-seeking. Optional workshops or coaching could be offered during high-demand periods such as examination blocks or transitions to clinical learning. However, trait-matched interventions should be tested in prospective studies before being recommended as evidence-based practice.

4.4. Future Directions

Future research should replicate the present findings in larger, multi-center samples of medical students and should follow students across preclinical and clinical years. Longitudinal designs are needed to determine whether personality traits prospectively precede changes in PWB, whether changes in well-being influence trait expression, or whether both are shaped by educational context.

Future research should also evaluate potential mediators and moderators, including coping strategies, resilience, perfectionism, social support, academic workload, and clinical exposure. Intervention studies should examine both distress outcomes and positive functioning, including environmental mastery, purpose in life, self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, and positive relations with others.

5. Conclusions

Big Five personality traits were associated with several dimensions of psychological well-being among Polish medical students. Neuroticism showed consistent negative associations with all PWB domains. Conscientiousness was most strongly associated with environmental mastery and purpose in life. Extraversion was positively associated with several domains, including positive relations and self-acceptance. Openness was selectively associated with personal growth, whereas Agreeableness showed a mixed pattern, including both positive relational associations and lower autonomy. The findings support a nuanced, trait-informed perspective on student well-being, but the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Medical schools should consider non-stigmatizing, universal, and optional well-being supports while future longitudinal studies clarify mechanisms and the value of interventions.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was waived by the Bioethics Committee at Poznan University of Medical Sciences due to the non-interventional, anonymous survey design.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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