

Chapter 15

Personality Disorders

The root word of personality in Latin, *persona*, refers to a mask, used in ancient times by an actor to reveal a vital aspect of a story figure. It was the emblem of the character, how they were known to the audience. This chapter describes a series of such “masks,” or perceived patterns, which are known to lead to impaired bonding with others. Because human beings live in a social world, such breakdowns can have a very harmful impact on love and work, and hence they are called disorders. Though it is only an aspect of the “self,” it is not always easy for people to see that. The traits are not “put on,” as an actor puts on a mask, but acquired over years from experiences and perhaps some inborn aspects of temperament. It is usually in place by the late teens or early adult life.

Section 5: Borderline Personality Disorder

I hate and I love. Why I do so, perhaps you ask.

I know not, but I feel it and I am in torment.

Gaius Valerius Catallus, *Carmina*, c. 54 B.C.

What Is the Definition?

Borderline means “on the border” or “on the edge.” This word was first used to describe an illness with symptoms so severe and dramatic that such patients were thought to be quite close to or “on the border of” Schizophrenia. It has become clear, however, that they are neither close to nor do they become schizophrenic.

What Are the Symptoms?

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a severe, life-threatening illness that pervades most aspects of living, such as bonds to others, sense of self, mood, and conduct. Affected people tend to feel almost constant psychic pain, weighed down by self-hate and by intense, painful relationships, with longing for closeness and yet fear of trusting others, and they may make frantic efforts to avoid feared loss of the other. They often act on impulse, with results that may be harmful to them. They feel empty and depressed, sometimes with sudden cycles of severe depression and suicide attempts, and they may injure themselves as a way to reduce the psychic pain. They are often very unsure about who they are, what they value, and what they want in life. They can quickly become confused and enraged in stressful contacts with others, which can briefly progress to paranoid ideas and symptoms of dissociation (see chapter 9). At other times, they can be quite winsome, responsive to the needs of others, and even put up with abusive people.

Who Is Affected?

About 2 percent of the population has this disorder, with three out of four of those being females. Childhood histories most often reveal marked physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse of these individuals who were often sensitive and even pliant as small children.

Onset and Course

Borderline Personality Disorder appears by the teen or early adult years. Since teens often have problems with sense of self and with relationships, care must be taken in making this diagnosis before adulthood.

Ten percent of borderline persons commit suicide, most often in the early years of their illness. In one major study, it was found that more than a third of women who had Borderline Personality Disorder along with marked depression and alcohol abuse committed suicide.

Many people have thought of those with this disorder as unreliable and not helped by treatment, making suicide threats and causing other crises, but follow-up studies have shown that over time with treatment, the great majority of them improve. By fifteen years after initial diagnosis, two-thirds of surviving patients are no longer borderline and are functioning normally or with only minimal symptoms.

Treatment

Self-Help. Persons with Borderline Personality Disorder often look for self-help resources, which are found in bookstores and on the Internet. They can be helped greatly by finding friends who can endure their distrust and sudden changes in mood. It is known that most people do recover, and also that they are often found, sometimes not until later, to be sensitive, intuitive, and creative. For books and other references, see appendix B.

Professional Help. People with this disorder often require both psychotherapy and medications from experts who are skilled in treating them. Skillful psychotherapy can help them through crises, provide them with steady support that promotes the growth of trust, and relieve their sense of great confusion and self-hate by helping them learn what happened to them in their early years. Although there is no specific drug treatment for the borderline disorder itself, such treatment is usually helpful for symptoms of psychic pain and distress, the most frequent and painful of which are those of depression. Patients may also require treatment for symptoms of other disorders, such as anxiety, phobic, posttraumatic, substance abuse, eating,

and panic disorders, as well as other personality disorders. Brief hospitalization may be required at times of extreme distress and suicidal intention.

L. Park

Section 7. Narcissistic Personality Disorder

He was like a cock who thought the sun had risen to hear him crow.

George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 1859

What Is the Definition?

The word *narcissistic* comes from Narcissus, a handsome youth of Greek myth who pined away with love for his own reflection. A person with Narcissistic Personality Disorder is obsessed with an extreme need to be admired, has a very grandiose picture of himself or herself, and at the same time lacks feelings for others.

What Are the Symptoms?

People with Narcissistic Personality Disorder have a marked sense of self-importance that is not based on the facts. They believe they are special and should be admired by others, yet their self-esteem can often be shaken temporarily. They may have frequent daydreams about their talents, abilities, and great futures. They feel worthy of special notice by other people and can become very angry if it is absent. On the other hand, if things are going their way, they can often be quite charming. They tend to exploit people for what they want because they do not care to or cannot tune in to the feelings and needs of others.

They may also look down on people, and if someone has special qualities, even just being happy, they can quickly become envious. Any or all of these ways of being may be deliberately concealed so that a casual observer might see only the mask of an idealistic, driven, or highly responsible person.

Who Is Affected?

Less than 1 percent of the population has Narcissistic Personality Disorder, with apparently the majority being male. They may also have mood, eating, and substance abuse problems, as well as other personality disorders.

Onset and Course

Narcissistic Personality Disorder appears by the teens or early adult years. However, many teens who show these characteristics do not progress to the disorder as adults.

This disorder was once thought to be highly stable throughout a person's life course. However, a recent study found that there tends to be some improvement in a majority, although others don't change over time.

Treatment

Self-Help. Sometimes a person with Narcissistic Personality Disorder might have some sense that there is a problem with feeling special and may then try to learn to compensate. Many resources in literature reveal narcissistic characteristics, for example, several of Charles Dickens's characters, including Steerforth and his mother in *David Copperfield*.

Professional Help. People with this disorder believe that their ways of thinking are right, so they usually do not try to help

themselves unless they become depressed or get into trouble, for instance, with legal, job-related, financial, or marital problems. If they do look to others, quite often it is to get their way or to make others change without changing themselves. They can be helped by experts who are especially trained to look for signs of this disorder. For instance, such a person may seek help for depression resulting from failure to achieve unrealistic goals or failure to succeed in controlling others. The depression may respond to a supportive therapist who can be admiring of the person's engaging ways. However, unless the expert can detect the deeper mental outlook, the person may end up in better spirits but with the same troublesome attitudes that got him or her into difficulty in the first place.

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