

Introduction

Personality disorders are long-term patterns of thoughts and behaviors that cause serious problems with relationships and work. There are several different types of personality disorders. Each one affects people differently. However, people with personality disorders generally have difficulty dealing with everyday stresses and problems.

This reference summary will help you understand personality disorders. It reviews some of the most common personality disorders and discusses their symptoms, causes, and treatment options.

Personality Disorders

Personality includes a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. It affects the way a person views, understands, and relates to the world. Personality also has to do with how a person sees him or herself.

Personality develops during childhood. It is shaped by two things: inherited tendencies and environment.

Inherited tendencies are the personality traits people receive from their parents. Children of outgoing, social parents are more likely to be talkative. Children of reserved, timid parents are more likely to be shy. Environment refers to a person's life situations. It includes the surroundings a person grew up in and events that took place. It also includes the type of relationships a person has with his or her family members and others.



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Personality disorders are long-term patterns of thoughts and behaviors that cause serious problems with relationships and work. A personality disorder is a type of mental illness. Healthcare professionals use the term “personality disorders” to refer to personality traits that are disabling.

People with personality disorders have difficulty dealing with everyday stresses and problems. These people often have trouble making and keeping positive relationships with others. Personality disorders typically begin during childhood. However, personality disorders usually are not diagnosed until adulthood. That’s because adolescent patterns of thinking and behaving may be temporary.



Symptoms

Specific types of personality disorders are grouped into clusters. These clusters are based on similar characteristics and symptoms. The three clusters of personality disorders are Cluster A, Cluster B, and Cluster C.

The following explains the symptoms of each type of personality disorder.

Cluster A personality disorders are disorders that include strange, unconventional thinking or behavior:

- Paranoid personality disorder
- Schizoid personality disorder
- Schizotypal personality disorder

Symptoms of paranoid personality disorder include: distrust and suspicion of others; the belief that people are trying to harm you; emotional detachment; hostility.

Symptoms of schizoid personality disorder include: lack of interest in social relationships; limited range of emotional expression; inability to pick up on social cues; appearing dull or uncaring to others.



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Symptoms of schizotypal personality disorder include: flat emotions or inappropriate emotional responses; the belief that people and events can be influenced by your thoughts; the belief that special messages are hidden in public speeches or displays; indifference to others.

Cluster B personality disorders are disorders that include dramatic or overly emotional thinking or behavior:

- Antisocial personality disorder
- Borderline personality disorder
- Histrionic personality disorder
- Narcissistic personality disorder

Symptoms of antisocial personality disorder include: indifference to others; constant lying or stealing; frequent trouble with the law; regularly violating the rights and safety of others; aggressive or violent behavior.



Symptoms of borderline personality disorder include: reckless and risky behavior; unstable relationships and mood; fear of being alone; suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

Symptoms of histrionic personality disorder include: frequent attention seeking behavior; extreme emotions; sensitive to the approval of others; unstable mood; excessive anxiety about physical appearance.

Symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder include: feelings of superiority; fantasizing about success, power, and attractiveness; exaggerated achievements and talents; expecting continuous praise; indifference to emotions and feelings of others.

Cluster C personality disorders are disorders that include anxious, fearful thinking or behavior:

- Avoidant personality disorder
- Dependent personality disorder
- Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder

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Symptoms of avoidant personality disorder include: extreme sensitivity to criticism; feelings of inadequacy; social separation; extreme shyness.

Symptoms of dependent personality disorder include: submissiveness; excessively dependent on others; strong desire to be taken care of; tolerant of abusive treatment; immediately begins a new relationship after one has ended.

Symptoms of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder include: fixated on orderliness and rules; inflexibility; inability to throw away worthless objects; strong desire to be in control; extreme perfectionism.

If you or a loved one experiences the symptoms of a personality disorder, talk to your healthcare provider. When left untreated, personality disorders may get worse. These disorders can cause significant problems in your life.



Causes

The exact cause of personality disorders is unknown. Personality disorder may be caused by a combination of family personality traits and environmental influences.

The personality traits of a parent or other family member can be passed on to children within that family. Racism and sexism are examples of personality traits that children may be exposed to at home. Over time, children may demonstrate similar personality traits. Environmental influences are the conditions that were present during a child's upbringing. Child abuse and recreational drug use by a parent are examples of environmental influences.



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While the cause of personality disorders is not known, there are certain factors that seem to increase the likelihood of developing a personality disorder.

The following factors may increase the risk of developing personality disorders:

- Abuse or neglect during childhood
- Diagnosis of childhood conduct disorder
- Family history of mental illness
- Loss of parents through death or divorce during childhood
- Poverty
- Unstable or chaotic household during childhood

Childhood conduct disorder is a behavior disorder in which a child or teen has a pattern of hostile, aggressive or disruptive behaviors for more than 6 months.

Diagnosis

No medical tests can diagnose a personality disorder. The diagnosis should be made by a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. A thorough social and medical history is necessary to diagnose a personality disorder. The psychiatrist may ask about symptoms and family history. Family members or friends may also be interviewed about any changes in your behavior.

A physical exam is generally included as part of the diagnosis. Blood tests and possible brain imaging may also be done. These tests can help determine whether the symptoms are caused by other medical problems.



Treatment

Personality disorders tend to last much of the adult life. However, long-term treatment can help control symptoms. With treatment, many people improve enough to lead satisfying lives.

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Treatment for personality disorders usually includes one or more of the following:

- Psychotherapy
- Medications
- Hospitalization

Psychotherapy is sometimes called “talk therapy”. It is the main way to treat personality disorders. During psychotherapy, you learn about your condition and how it affects your thoughts, behaviors, mood and feelings. This helps you learn healthy ways to manage your symptoms.

There are many different types of psychotherapy. Your healthcare provider can help you decide which type is right for you.



Psychiatric medications that can be used to treat personality disorder symptoms include:

- Antidepressant medications
- Mood-stabilizing medications
- Anti-anxiety medications
- Antipsychotic medications

Antidepressant medications may be useful in treating depression, hopelessness, anger, impulsivity, and irritability. Mood-stabilizing medications may be useful in reducing mood swings. They can also treat aggression, irritability, and impulsivity.

Anti-anxiety medications may be useful in treating agitation, anxiety, or insomnia. However, these medications can increase impulsive behavior. Antipsychotic medications may be useful in treating psychosis, which is losing touch with reality, and some anxiety or anger problems.

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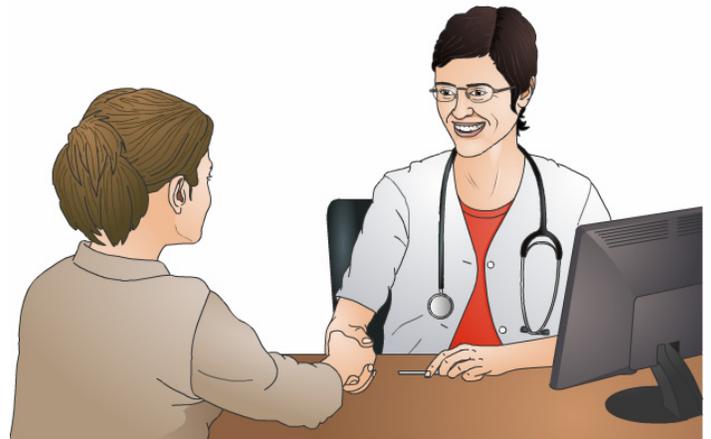
All medications carry the risk of side effects. Talk to your healthcare provider about medications that may be useful in treating your symptoms. You should never start or stop a medication without first talking to your healthcare provider. Many people experience greater relief from their symptoms by combining medications and psychotherapy. You can reduce your risk of relapse by following the treatment plan for as long as your healthcare provider recommends.

Severe cases of personality disorder may require psychiatric hospitalization. This treatment is usually recommended if your personality disorder puts you or others in immediate danger. If you are in immediate danger of harming yourself or someone else, seek help. Residential treatment is sometimes recommended for people who need a supportive place to live while they receive treatment for a personality disorder.

Summary

Personality disorders are long-term patterns of thoughts and behaviors that cause serious problems with relationships and work. People with personality disorders have difficulty dealing with everyday stresses and problems. Personality disorders typically begin during childhood. However, personality disorders are not usually diagnosed until adulthood.

The exact cause of personality disorders is not known. There are certain factors that seem to increase the likelihood of developing a personality disorder. Many of these factors relate to social, emotional, and economic conditions that were present during childhood.



No medical test can diagnose a personality disorder. The diagnosis should be made by a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Treatment for personality disorders usually includes psychotherapy, medications or a combination of both. Hospitalization may be needed if the personality disorder threatens the safety of self or others.

Personality disorders tend to last much of the adult life. However, long-term treatment can help control symptoms. With treatment, many people improve enough to lead satisfying lives.

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