

Personality Disorder

A personality is the way someone thinks, feels and behaves. It is who we are and how we feel about ourselves. For most people this remains fairly consistent across situations and time. Some individuals, however, may experience difficulties in how they think and feel about themselves and others.

A personality disorder can be a coping mechanism as a result for an adverse life experiences or trauma; it is not just someone choosing to behave in a certain way.

Everyone's personality is unique. Personalities develop as people go through different life experiences. Most people are flexible enough to learn from past experiences and to change their behaviour when needed. Someone with a personality disorder finds it much harder to control their behaviour. They experience extreme thoughts and feelings that are so intense they have trouble coping with day-to-day life. They act in ways they can't control, and struggle to relate to situations and people. As a result of these challenges, they often experience significant problems and limitations in their relationships, social encounters, work and schooling.¹

Sometimes people get personality disorders confused with bipolar disorder. A personality disorder involves a longstanding pattern of abrupt, moment-to-moment swings in moods and behaviour. Bipolar involves distinct episodes of mania or depression. More information about bipolar is available in the Bipolar factsheet in this series.

Personality disorders are mental health issues where your personality and behaviour causes you or others distress. There are many different

types and potential causes of personality disorders, and the signs and symptoms are diverse.

Personality disorders are very complex and there are many different types. It can be hard to diagnose a personality disorder.

Types of personality disorders:

Some of the different types of personality disorders are:

Antisocial personality disorder: Tendency to not care about others to the point of being aggressive and violent, or violating other people's rights.

Avoidant personality disorder: Feeling hypersensitive to criticism or rejection, and experiencing extreme shyness.

Borderline personality disorder: Acting impulsively, taking huge risks, experiencing significant distress, having an explosive temper or unstable moods.

Narcissistic personality disorder: Believing that you're better than everyone else.

Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder: Being extremely controlling, preoccupied with perfection, rules and orderliness; unable to throw away old or broken stuff.

Schizotypal personality disorder: Not really caring about other people and having unusual thoughts, such as 'magical thinking' – that is, believing you can influence people and events by your thoughts.

People with personality disorders don't always realise they have a disorder because their way of thinking and behaving seems so natural to them and part of their personality. Their thoughts and behaviours may be a protective response to trauma and or adversity.

¹ [What are personality disorders? | Personality disorders | ReachOut Australia](https://au.reachout.com/articles/what-are-personality-disorders) - <https://au.reachout.com/articles/what-are-personality-disorders>



Symptoms:

The symptoms of personality disorders are personality traits that everyone may display at some time. The difference is for people with personality disorders is that their behaviour is extreme and, usually, they are unable to adapt to or change it.

Personality disorders usually are not diagnosed until 18 years of age because our personality is in constant development up to that age.

Children and teenagers have hormonal changes that affect their mood and the signs can be the same or similar to a personality disorder. If you experience behaviours that concern you and disturbs your normal life, please see you doctor.

Some signs that a person has a personality disorder might include:

- frequent mood swings
- extreme dependence on other people
- narcissism (extreme vanity)
- stormy personal relationships
- social isolation
- angry outbursts
- suspicion and mistrust of others
- difficulty making friends
- a need for instant gratification
- poor impulse control
- alcohol or substance abuse
- self-harm, or threatening or attempting suicide

Everyone may experience some of these from time to time and not everyone with a personality disorder will have all these signs. If you experience these signs for most of the day – every day – or if you are concerned about any of the feelings you are having, you should seek help from your doctor.

Causes:

It is not known exactly what causes personality disorders. However, certain factors could make it more likely that someone develops one. They include:

- a family history of personality disorders or other mental health concerns
- abuse or neglect during childhood
- an unstable or chaotic family life during childhood
- being diagnosed with childhood conduct disorder
- loss of parents through death, or a traumatic divorce, during childhood
- other significant traumas

People with a personality disorder do not choose to feel the way they do, and are in no way responsible for developing the disorder.

Getting support:

The type of treatment depends on the type of personality disorder. Many personality disorders are related to other mental health concerns, although the behaviour is usually more enduring and chronic. For example, obsessive compulsive personality disorder is related to obsessive compulsive disorder, schizoid personality disorder to schizophrenia, and avoidant personality disorder to social phobia. Therefore, some similar treatment approaches may be used. For borderline personality disorder, talking therapies are the main treatment approach. Medication can be used to treat aspects of the disorder.

It can be difficult to diagnose a personality disorder and sometimes health professionals can be triggering to a person. It can be helpful to have a carer who knows the person well visit the doctor to help explain what is going on and be a support for the person experiencing signs and symptoms.



While our understanding of the effective treatment of personality disorders is still growing, the earlier treatment is sought the more effective it is likely to be.

Your doctor is a good place to start when seeking mental health help. The factsheet in this series *Getting Professional Mental Health Help* has more information on seeking professional help.

If you don't feel comfortable talking with your doctor about your mental health, you can look for another one who you are comfortable with. It may take some time to find the right doctor for you.

Project Air has resources for consumers and their families, partners & carers including fact sheets, consumer lived experience stories & videos. Visit <https://www.uow.edu.au/project-air/resources/> for more information.

If you need help now

If you think someone could hurt themselves or others, get urgent help.

Call emergency services

Dial triple zero (000)

Call Lifeline

Dial 13 11 14

About this factsheet:

This information is not medical advice. It is generic and does not take into account your personal circumstances, physical wellbeing, mental status or mental health requirements. Do not use this information to treat or diagnose your own, or another person's medical condition and never ignore medical advice or delay seeking it because of something in this information. Any medical questions should be referred to a qualified healthcare professional. If in doubt, please always seek medical advice.

Sources

This factsheet has been adapted from a similar document published on the website of reachout.com. The original can be viewed at <https://au.reachout.com/articles/what-are-personality-disorders>

Other sources include

What is borderline personality disorder? - Mental health and psychosocial disability (nsw.gov.au) - <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/mentalhealth/psychosocial/foundations/Pages/types-bpd.aspx>

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