

## What is a Personality Disorder?

by  
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To understand what a “Personality Disorder” is let’s first discuss what defines a “personality”. A person’s personality is comprised of a distinctive set of behavioral traits and behavior patterns that reflect our character or individuality. It is how we perceive the world, deal with our stress, and form our relationships with others. Our attitudes, thoughts, and feelings are all part of our personality. A “personality disorder” is then an unhealthy pattern of thinking and behaving causing significant problems and limitations in relationships, social encounters, work and school. Most importantly, people struggling with a personality disorder usually feel that their behavior patterns are “normal” or “right” making them inflexible and rigid- despite having such great difficulty dealing with other people and the demands of life. There are many specific types of personality disorders which are grouped into three clusters based on similar characteristics and symptoms.

Cluster A is characterized by odd, eccentric thinking or behavior and includes: 1) Paranoid personality disorder which generally presents as a hostile distrust and suspicion of others. 2) Schizoid personality disorder which generally presents as an indifferent lack of interest in social relationships and a limited range of emotional expression. 3) Schizotypal personality disorder which generally presents as peculiar beliefs or behavior with perceptual disturbances, magical thinking, and believing that messages are hidden in speech/behavior/objects.

Cluster B is characterized by dramatic, overly emotional thinking or behavior and includes: 1) Antisocial personality disorder which generally presents as criminal (sociopathic) behavior. 2) Borderline personality disorder which generally presents with impulsive high risk behavior coupled with volatile relationships, an unstable mood, and suicidal behavior. 3) Histrionic personality disorder which generally presents as emotional, self-centered attention-seeking with an unstable mood . 4) Narcissistic personality disorder which generally presents as a belief that you are better than others and deserve special treatment.

Cluster C is characterized by anxious, fearful thinking or behavior and includes: 1) Avoidant personality disorder which generally presents as a hypersensitivity to criticism or rejection while feeling inadequate and embarrassed. 2) Dependent personality disorder which generally presents as excessive submissiveness and dependence on others. 3) Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder which generally presents with an inflexible detail-oriented perfectionism and need to be in control (this isn’t the same as obsessive-compulsive disorder which is a type of anxiety disorder).

Personality disorders affect 10-15% of the adult US population, are usually recognizable by adolescence or earlier, and continue throughout adulthood unless treated. The cause of a personality disorder is thought to be the product of various early life circumstances in people who are thought to be predisposed to developing these problems.

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The prevalence of a personality disorder based on gender depends on the type. Schizoid Personality Disorder is slightly more common in males than in females. Antisocial Personality Disorder occurs 3 times more often in men. Borderline Personality Disorder is 3 times more common in women. Narcissistic Personality Disorder occurs up to 3 times more often in men. Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder is diagnosed twice as often in men.

There are many ways a personality disorder can have a devastating impact on your life if left untreated- socially, occupationally, physically, and legally. Treatment for these disorders requires a mental health professional and may include medication in addition to psychotherapy.