



Essential Information

What are Personality Disorders?

Personality disorder is a recognised mental disorder and describes long term inflexible and maladaptive personality traits that result in significant distress and impairment for the person and usually others around them. These traits often emerge in adolescence or early adulthood and affect most areas of life, including relationships, work, and study. Common subtypes include borderline, antisocial, narcissistic, obsessive compulsive, avoidant and schizotypal personality disorder. Whilst the traits of each have some different features, they also share common elements.

Problems with emotions and expressing feelings

People with personality disorders may experience difficulties managing their emotions and communicating these feelings to other people. Some people experience very intense emotions that are hard to manage and can change suddenly. Some may experience intense anger, feel very nervous, or be highly suspicious. It can be hard to manage these distressing emotions alone and people with personality disorders may hurt themselves or others as a way to cope with overwhelming feelings.

Relationship difficulties

People with personality disorders can find it difficult to manage relationships with other people. This can include intense on-and-off relationships and strong fears of being abandoned and high sensitivity to others. Some may want to have relationships but intensely fear them at the same time. They might avoid social gatherings because they always worry that people will make fun of them and so they feel very ashamed. Some may only feel good in relationships when they behave in ways to make sure they always outshine others in order to feel strong.

Some may feel a complete lack of interest in relationships or have difficulty understanding or showing care for those around them, and some may act in a hurtful way towards others. Though these problems might appear different, they all mean that people with personality disorders can find it challenging to maintain meaningful and satisfying relationships.

Problems with sense of self and identity

People with personality disorders may struggle with their sense of self and may have difficulties knowing who they are and what they want out of life. While some might feel empty inside or strongly rely on other people to make them feel like they're worth something as a person. Some people may be very rigid in the way they interact with the world, becoming overly focused on work, rules, and doing things perfectly. These difficulties may make it harder to set and follow long-term goals and have a meaningful sense of direction in life.

How common are these problems and why do they develop?

It is estimated that around 6.5% of the Australian population experience these types of problems at any given point in time. The exact causes of personality disorders are unknown but they are thought to involve several contributing factors:

- Biological or genetic factors (inherited from family) including extreme sensitivity to emotions
- Relationship with caregivers in early childhood that was problematic
- Traumatic early life experiences (e.g., abuse, neglect, death of parents, peer-victimisation)
- Ways of thinking and coping with feelings – often learnt during childhood and through experiences with other people
- Stressful social circumstances – financial, work, relationship, or family

Can they be treated?

Yes, specialist psychological treatments provided by mental health professionals have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms and improving life quality.

