

What is a 'personality disorder'?



Personality disorder is a term used to describe personality traits when they have become extreme, inflexible, and maladaptive. This tends to create a pattern of problems that cause the person and those around them significant distress over a period of time. These problems usually start in adolescence or early adulthood and affect most areas of life.

Changing emotions and strong, overwhelming feelings

People with these problems often describe their feelings as very intense, suddenly changing and easily triggered. One minute they may feel OK and the next they may feel very angry or sad or anxious. Sometimes, these feelings can be so overwhelming that the person may find it difficult to control their behaviour and act in ways that they later regret.

Relationship difficulties

People with these problems also often describe difficulty managing their relationships with others. This can include intense and stormy relationships with a pattern of breaking-up and making-up. People may also describe being very sensitive to signs of rejection and criticism, which can lead to behaving in desperate ways to avoid abandonment or, alternatively, avoiding any closeness with others altogether.

Problems with identity and sense of self

Maintaining a clear and consistent sense of one's own self can be difficult, particularly under times of stress or conflict. People often describe not knowing who they really are including what they think and feel; they may also describe feeling

empty or hollow inside and like everything is no longer real and they are living in a dream. During particularly stressful times, it is not unusual to become extremely suspicious or paranoid about others.

Impulsive and self-destructive behaviours

People with these problems often describe acting before they have fully thought through the consequences of their behaviours. This is called impulsive behaviour and may involve engaging in drug and alcohol use, binge eating, reckless driving, or risky sexual behaviours. Deliberate self-harm or suicide attempts may also occur in response to feeling overwhelmed. While all of these behaviours may provide some short-term relief from suffering, in the long-term they have more serious negative consequences.

How common are these problems and why do they develop?

It is thought that around 7-11% of the Australian population suffer from this pattern of problems at any given point in time. The exact cause of these problems is unknown but it is thought to arise due to a combination of factors including:

- Biological factors – genetic or acquired
- Drug and alcohol use
- Early life experiences – abuse, neglect, death of parents, or other losses and trauma
- Self-esteem and ways of thinking
- Current social circumstances – financial, work, relationship or family stress.

Can it be treated?

Yes, specific psychological treatments provided by mental health professionals have been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms and improve life functioning. For treatment and support contact your local health services.

The Project Air Strategy is funded by NSW Health and involves mental health workers, consumers and carers improving the lives of people living with a personality disorder. The Project offers high quality training and education and implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries and better treatments. Contact us at info-projectair@uow.edu.au or visit www.projectairstrategy.org.



Health



PROJECT AIR
A PERSONALITY DISORDERS STRATEGY