

Personality Disorders or Disorder

Introduction

Personality disorders or disorder is a type of mental illness characterised by long term, rigid patterns of thinking and behaviour that is abnormal. Such abnormal, maladaptive behaviour creates problems in daily living, relationships and ability to function efficiently at work, school or social situations. Earlier they were called as character disorders.

The character of an individual is shown through his or her personality such as by the way he/she thinks, feels, and behaves. When the behaviour is inflexible, maladaptive and antisocial causing significant distress for the individual and for others then such an individual is said to have a personality disorder.

Personality disorders are common conditions affecting 10% and 15% of the general population. They often begin as problems in personal development and character in childhood and peak during adolescence. Hence they are usually diagnosed during adolescence or early adulthood. However they often go unrecognized because those afflicted do not realise that they have a problem as their way of thinking and behaving seems natural to them. They hence do not seek help or treatment.

There are many specific types of personality disorders. They may vary from mild to severe. Based on their own set of behaviours and symptoms they are grouped into three different categories or clusters.

The different clusters include Cluster A: characterized by odd, eccentric thinking or behaviour. It includes paranoid personality disorder (the individual cannot be trusted and is suspicious), schizoid personality disorder

(the individual has an indifferent attitude and is an introvert) and schizotypal personality disorder (the individual dwells on delusions).

Cluster B: characterized by dramatic, overly emotional or erratic thinking or behaviour. It includes antisocial personality disorder (in this the individual gains pleasure in bullying others), borderline personality disorder (the individual has the tendency to harm himself and has an unstable relationship with others), histrionic personality disorder (the individual wants to be the centre of attention) and narcissistic personality disorder (these individuals think very high of themselves).

Cluster C: characterized by anxious, fearful thinking or behaviour. It includes avoidant personality disorder (these individuals are extremely shy and sensitive), dependent personality disorder (these individuals are always dependent on others) and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (.

Signs and Symptoms

The general signs and symptoms of individuals with a personality disorder include frequent mood swings, stormy relationships, social isolation, angry outbursts, suspicion and mistrust of others, difficulty in making friends, need for instant gratification, poor impulse control or impulsive behaviour such as excessive spending, binge eating and risky sex, alcohol or substance abuse.

Diagnosis

The doctor makes a diagnosis based on the individual's history or the information given by family, friends or peers, signs and symptoms, physical examination, psychological evaluation/assessment, laboratory tests such as a complete blood count and thyroid function test.

Treatment

Treatment may vary according to the type of personality disorder but the general management measures include psychotherapy which includes cognitive and behavioural therapy (CBT). It is type of talk therapy in which the affected individual, group or family are counselled by the therapist to recognize, relax, and cope with their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Medications are usually prescribed to relieve some of the symptoms of personality disorders, including problems with anxiety and perceptions such as anti-anxiety medicines, antidepressants and antipsychotics. Sometimes hospitalization may be effective. Participation in self-help groups may also be helpful.

Complications

Certain complications of personality disorders include distress due to difficulties with proper functioning in social, personal, professional, vocational and other important realms of life. Development of other mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, panic disorders, eating disorders, deliberate self-harm and substance misuse.

Outcome

The outcome is good with proper medical and psychological help.

Prevention

There is no known way to prevent them but early identification and intervention may help.

More Information:

Blais, M.A., Smallwood, P., James E. Groves, J.E. and Rivas-Vazquez, R.A.
(2008), Personality and Personality Disorders, in: Stern, T.A.,