


Difficult people **at work**

Ten intertwined personality disorders
encountered at work

By Jean-Pierre Rolland



MORE INSIGHT
MORE IMPACT



Certain individuals have a pathological personality type that may cause suffering or even adverse effects on behaviour

Certain individuals have a pathological personality type that may cause suffering or even adverse effects on behaviour, making them paranoid, antisocial, narcissistic, obsessive, etc. What is meant by these terms?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), personality can be defined as “the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment”. Personality traits can be defined as the differences between individuals in terms of how they think, experience emotions, and act. For example, an individual who often intensely and lastingly feels fear or anxiety – which, of themselves, are normal, passing emotional states rather than personality traits – may be considered to be

a fearful or anxious individual. In such a case, fear and anxiety are emotional traits: constant ways of reacting that are characteristic of the individual.

Each individual has a unique combination of traits. However, when personality traits are rigid (i.e. when they no longer change), are inappropriate for a given situation or event, and cause suffering or a change in psychological functioning, psychologists and psychiatrists talk about “personality disorders”, “difficult personalities” and “dysfunctional styles or tendencies”

Ten intertwined disorders

These difficult personalities are presented below. Various models are used to describe these disorders; here, the model developed by the American Psychiatry Association (APA) is used. This suggests ten dysfunctional styles, into which a large amount of research has been conducted. The aim is not to pigeonhole individuals in a set category, but to supply a set of reference points as an aid to understanding the psychological

dynamic of individuals with personality disorders; in our opinion, the latter cannot be fully isolated from each other. For instance, an individual may be both narcissistic and paranoid, to varying degrees.

1. The Obsessive-Compulsive personality

“It’s important to be perfect in everything. Mistakes are bad – and I mustn’t make any. I’m the only person I can rely on to check that something’s been done properly. I have to do everything and organise everything myself, or it won’t be done properly. Anything less than one hundred percent success for me is a complete failure.”

Obsessive-compulsive individuals are excessively preoccupied by order and rules. They want to be in control of everything, so they establish and adhere to rules, procedures, timetables, lists, and so on; these become more important than the goal of the activity itself, and the person may even lose sight of the latter. Such individuals are very careful and meticulous, and tend to check and repeat things to ensure they have not made a mistake. They seek perfection and are therefore extremely attentive to details – which can also distract them from the main object of the exercise.

If they are actively involved in their professional activity, they may devote themselves to it excessively, at the expense of other areas of their life such as family life, social life, leisure activities, and friends, and not find time to relax. Any leisure, relaxation or fun activities are taken seriously and must also be structured and organised. This need for structure and strict rules is part of their value system – and they may seek to impose this rigidly on others. They are “sticklers for principle”, seeing rules and instructions as something to be applied strictly rather than be adjusted depending on circumstances or needs. They find it very difficult to delegate, because they trust only themselves.

In general, they insist on everything being done their way, in line with the very detailed rules and instructions they give. In management or supervision, they plan everything beforehand, in detail, and tend to monitor their reports very closely. These individuals can find it difficult to take unforeseen decisions in the absence of information they deem to be essential. In such cases, decision-making is delayed or inhibited by their perfectionism, rigidity, and desire to control.

The less severe forms of this disorder result in a meticulous approach to details and procedure when seeking to achieve a goal. However, if the personality style is pronounced, the individual may get bogged down in details, clarifications, and the quest for perfection. They may attach more importance to adhering to the procedure and the quest for absolute perfection than to meeting deadlines.

For these individuals, relationships with others and social interaction are seen as a way of moving things forward – and the more they are in control of the situation, the better they feel. They often like tidying and planning activities, and can implement complex, multi-layered systems for tidying and filing; they waste a lot of time improving and fine-tuning these.

2. The Anti-Social personality

“We live in a jungle where only the strongest survive. I have the right to what I want. People are made to be used. Strength and cunning are excellent ways of achieving a goal. If I don’t exploit others, they’ll exploit me. Lying and cheating are allowed, so long as you don’t get caught. If others don’t protect themselves, that’s their lookout.”

They find it difficult to experience feelings of regret, remorse, or guilt.

People with a dominant antisocial personality style appear to lack reference points (internalisation and observance of social rules) and empathy (understanding and respecting others). They tend to view social norms (convention, rules, regulations, procedures, taboos, and laws) as limitations that apply to others if they accept them: as far as they are concerned, finding ways round these is a way of breaking free of them. They like taking risks and seek them out, with their attendant thrills, without which life would be dull and boring. They sometimes take mindless risks and cross the line for minimal or even derisory gains.

However, they find it very difficult to resist this need (or temptation), and are not held back by rules, convention, or respect for others. Such individuals are non-conformist and impulsive. On first contact, they are often very seductive, and this can hide their tendency to be focused on their own interests and their complete lack of respect for rules or other people. They know how to use charm, manipulation, cunning, lies and deception to exploit others, without losing their composure or self-assurance. They have little concern for the truth and have virtually no scruples. Unpleasant experiences and punishments have almost no effect on them: they do not learn anything as a result.

3. The Borderline personality

“Nobody understands me. I’m a burden for others. It’s impossible for me to control or discipline myself. I don’t make any friends, because they’d hurt me. I need to control my emotions, or else something terrible will happen.”

This personality style is characterised by a fragile self-image (satisfaction-dissatisfaction), great instability in the evaluation of events (optimism-pessimism), as well as fluctuations in relationships (admiration-disdain, friendship-hostility, love-hatred, idealisation-devaluing) and emotions (pride-shame, joy-sadness, exaltation-depression, dysphoria-euphoria). These individuals find it difficult to control their emotions (in particular anger), making them unpredictable with regard to their mood and point of view, but predictable inasmuch as such mood swings are entirely to be expected. These quick, pronounced changes in their judgement and affections are often associated with impulsive behaviours that can lead to regrets and remorse.

There really is no “middle ground” in such individuals’ judgement: they either love or hate, whether it’s themselves, others, events, working and living conditions, or anything else. As far as they are concerned, everything is either black or white, and they switch from one point of view to another in a way that is very disconcerting for their interlocutors. Under the influence of emotion (euphoria or distress) or their judgement in the moment (satisfaction-dissatisfaction), these individuals may take decisions that they quickly regret once the mental state triggering them has calmed, or veers in the opposite direction.

They have a negative self-image, with the result

that they believe others are going to abandon them; they are therefore capable of immoderate behaviour to avoid this real or imagined abandonment. They tend to “sabotage” themselves just as they are about to achieve a goal: not turning up for an exam or interview that seems to be ripe for a positive outcome, suddenly breaking off a relationship that seems promising, etc.

4. The Schizoid personality

“Life is simpler without others. Relationships cause problems. I prefer to keep my distance. I don’t understand why others are happy together. I’m a social misfit. Life is dull and thankless.”

Individuals with a “pronounced” schizoid personality style are introverted, distant, withdrawn, discreet and retiring. They have almost no social relationships, are impassive, and express few emotions. They like being alone and do not seek out company. They do not make many friends or express themselves much, and find it difficult to do so. They are indifferent to others and their praises and criticism, and are not interested in other people’s feelings (or do not perceive them). What most people consider to be enjoyable (for example, a good meal with friends) is often a source of little pleasure for such individuals.

It is still not known how subjects with this personality style can be distinguished from those presenting the initial symptoms of schizophrenia.

5. The Dependant personality

“I’m weak and unable to cope alone. I need others to help me take decisions or tell me what to do. The very worst thing would be if I were abandoned.”

they are unsupervised make them very uncomfortable and cause them a lot of stress, as do any signs of rejection or abandonment.

Dependent individuals have submissive, clingy behaviours; they need to be taken care of, supported and reassured. They lack self-confidence and believe themselves to be incapable of coping alone. They are afraid of being abandoned or rejected, and find it very difficult to take decisions, even simple ones, both in everyday life and at work. In such situations, faced with choices and decisions, they need advice and reassurance, and so tend to rely on others and let the latter shoulder their responsibilities.

Such individuals find it very difficult to express disagreement, irritation or anger. They are convinced they are incompetent and unfit to take decisions, and may even put up with solutions they deem to be wrong or unsuitable in order to avoid losing other people’s support. They are hypersensitive to minor signs of abandonment, whether real or imagined, and react violently to these. They can make sacrifices, accept unreasonable demands or unbalanced relationships, and may even let themselves be dominated and manipulated.

Individuals with dependent personalities find it very difficult to conceive of life without the support of someone else; if they perceive themselves to be in danger of losing this support, they quickly seek the help of another person. They see disagreements and criticism as proof of their incompetence. Their network of relationships tends to be confined to the people they are dependent on. Situations in which they have to take initiatives and in which

6. The Paranoid personality

“I can’t trust others, because they have hidden motives: if they’re nice, it’s to deceive or exploit me. I need to be constantly on my guard. It isn’t wise to confide in others – they’ll exploit it.”

Individuals with a “pronounced” paranoid personality are distrustful – excessively so – and suspicious of others, believing that their intentions are hostile. They expect – with no good reason – those around them to cheat on them, harm them, and exploit them. They have ill-founded doubts about the loyalty and faithfulness of their friends and family. They do not confide or communicate, for fear of any information they give being used against them. They perceive insignificant events to constitute attacks, threats, and attempts to humiliate them. They are unforgiving and hold grudges if they feel they have been humiliated, hurt, ignored, or despised. They react angrily to these supposed threats, humiliations, and attacks, counter-attacking straightaway. They are also incapable of calling themselves into question or submitting to collective discipline. They refuse all criticism, are authoritarian, and always insist they are right.

7. The Histrionic personality

“To be happy, I need other people’s attention. If I’m not amusing or impressing others, I’m nothing. I need to be the centre of their universe. If I’m amusing those around me, they won’t notice my weaknesses. I know how to be charming in order to make people help and like me.”

Histrionic individuals have a need to be the centre of attention; they show this through flamboyant or provocative theatrics, showy behaviour, dress, and physical appearance, and through an emotional life of excesses (in terms of feeling and expressing emotions) that is overwhelming, inappropriate, and embarrassing for others. They feel uncomfortable and abandoned unless everyone is looking at them and if they aren’t, find this depressing. They need to impress others and have a tendency to be excessive, exaggerate, and dramatize things. They deal with reality and relationships subjectively and emotionally, with the result that they are very sensitive to atmospheres, and thus very easily influenced.

In addition, they have somewhat superficial relationships with others, based initially on seductiveness and charm, the aim often being to meet a need for affection and attract positive attention and admiration. If these expectations are not met, they experience unpleasant feelings such as bit-

terness, gloominess, irritation, anger, sadness, and depression.

In general, histrionic individuals make an excellent first impression, because they are not playing a role. But their excessive demonstrativeness, mood changes, and constant need for attention quickly become tiring and embarrassing, and their entourage tries to avoid them. Faced with this change, they resort to charm and seductiveness. If these approaches fail to work, they switch to theatrics. Relationships with them are a succession of highs and lows: they rarely forge sincere, deep relationships.

8. The Narcissistic personality

“I am an exceptional, unique person, and so I deserve special treatment and privileges. If those around me don’t show me the respect I deserve, they should be punished. Other people should meet my needs, which are more important than theirs. There is no need for anybody to interfere in my business.”

Narcissistic individuals feel important and exceptional (superior, special, and unique), and that they deserve special treatment. If they do not feel properly appreciated, their reaction varies from surprise to anger. They need to be admired, and don't display any empathy for other people's ideas and feelings. They expect others to share the high opinion they have of themselves, and to give them the signs of admiration and respect they believe they deserve. They become very irritated when this doesn't happen. They tend to believe that “ordinary” people cannot understand their special needs or their quest for excellence. They consider their work and missions to be essential and deserving of top priority, and that they should receive unreserved, immediate help to achieve their important goals. They can therefore be very demanding, or even tyrannical, with their reports. A number of factors can hinder their potential being expressed and their career progress: the difficulties they encounter in their relationships with others, resulting from their sense of entitlement; the constant, excessive need to be admired; their lack of sensitivity to others and the great difficulty they have in listening to them and taking into account their needs and points of view; and the fact that they cannot stand negative feedback and failures.

Narcissistic individuals are talented and charming on first contact, and their self-assurance and self-confidence can be impressive and well-perceived. However, they always want more and end up being unbearable. In fact, beneath this outer shell of self-confidence – which can be somewhat disconnected from reality – they have fragile self-esteem. In such cases, in certain difficult situations when their skills are called into question by criticism, narcissistic individuals who are usually smiling, self-assured, friendly, and expressive, can become hostile and vindictive. In other cases, egocentric self-confidence is so deeply rooted in them that they remain unaffected by even the most biting criticism: interpreting it as jealousy, they remain calm and composed, fully assured of their inestimable value. At work, individuals with a narcissistic personality disorder can cause problems: they tend to think that their skills and achievements are not sufficiently recognised and rewarded. Their enthusiasm, confident assurance, motivation, and energy then turn into dissatisfaction and resentment.

9. The Avoidant personality

“I’m socially incompetent. Other people are superior to me. They’re going to criticize, ignore, or humiliate me. If someone spends time with me, they’ll get to know who I really am and reject me. I must avoid unpleasant situations at all costs, and not take risks.”

This personality style, where the individual is cautious and timid, corresponds to a deep feeling of incompetence, combined with hypersensitivity to criticism and disapproval. Avoidant individuals fear other people’s judgement, which they believe occurs very often, and avoid it. As a result, they eschew relationships with others, as well as most situations liable to lead to judgement (new responsibilities, promotions, confrontations, and situations involving opposition). They expect criticism, contradiction, and disapproval, and so prefer not to take a view or express themselves, so as to avoid being exposed to humiliation and embarrassment. Whenever possible, they also avoid all situations and assignments in which they would have to take risks or decisions.

They lack trust in themselves and never feel capable, resulting in them not being very involved in relationships. If circumstances call for it, they can face up to this fear of being judged, but in the long term this proves to be very costly. In a few extreme

situations, if they feel particularly threatened, they may avoid difficult situations by using a range of strategies with varying degrees of appropriateness, such as missing a meeting or an appointment. Their limited network of relationships increases their isolation in difficult situations and is a hindrance to their career. Similarly, their avoidance of the social situations that are part and parcel of performing certain tasks or assignments properly, or conducive to promotion, is a major handicap.

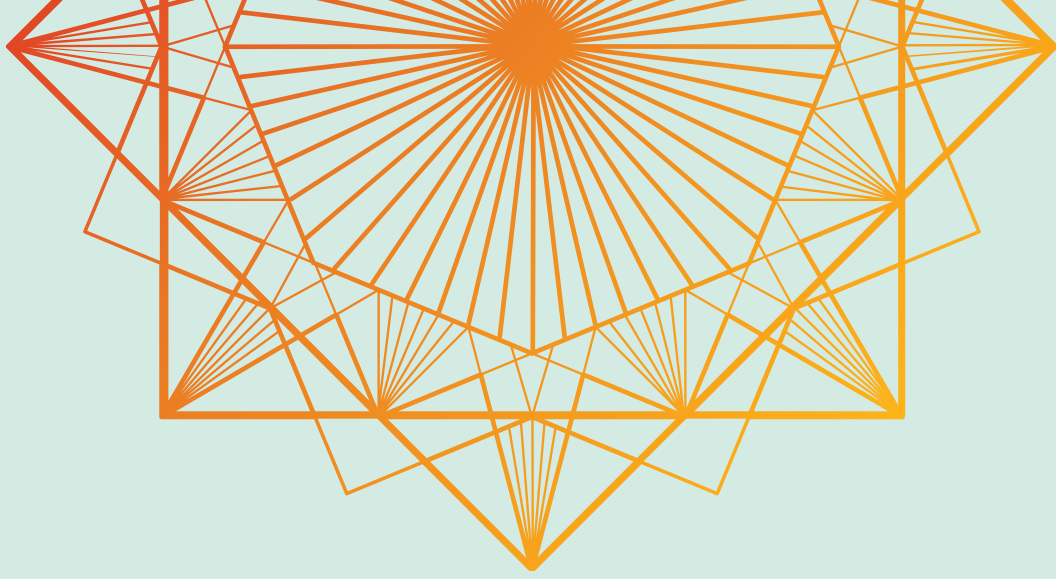
10. The Schizotypal personality

“They’re trying to influence me, but I mustn’t let anyone manipulate me. I have certain special powers; I can read the signs. There’s a reason for everything; nothing happens by chance. Sometimes, I get premonitions of what’s about to happen. I know what other people are thinking.”

Schizotypal individuals tend to think, express themselves, dress, and behave in atypical, eccentric, affected, strange, or even bizarre ways. They are embarrassed, clumsy, and awkward in their relationships with others. These strange behaviours are spontaneous, rather than being aimed at attracting attention or the result of a deliberate lack of respect. These individuals often misinterpret minor events, which take on great significance for them. They may also interpret insignificant events as signs, omens or messages. They sometimes get the feeling they have “powers” enabling them to perceive signs that other people do not see, foretell events in advance, detect someone’s presence, or read people’s minds. As they are awkward with other people, they generally have few close friends they can confide in. They do not understand the usual “signs” that regulate social exchanges. They are uncomfortable and tense with others, and tend to avoid them.

It should be pointed out that these ten personalities are dysfunctional only if they are rigid, maladjusted, and cause suffering or a noticeable change in an individual’s functioning. A large number of studies have shown that these disorders have a variety of consequences and symptoms; for example,

individuals with a dysfunctional personality have a life expectancy that is some fifteen years shorter than that of the general population. Their quality of life is affected by stress, anxiety, tiredness, and so on, and they are at greater risk of suicide attempts.



Violence, suffering and failures

Often these individuals are also more violent, both towards themselves and towards others, and they use more addictive substances, such as alcohol and drugs. They exhibit criminal behaviour, suffer, and make other people suffer, such that their social relationships and friendships are usually poor. Lastly, in general they experience personal and professional failure, and find it difficult to find and keep a job.

Contrary to what might be expected, these dysfunctional styles cannot really be said to be rare. The proportion of individuals concerned by at least one of these disorders is between 9 and 25% of the general population (although the figure varies depending on the study and the age, nationality and method of analysis used). Recently, in the United Kingdom, a study of over 10,000 executives revealed a prevalence of between 3.7% for the dependent personality (with variations of 0.9 to 10.6% depending on the sectors of activity) to 11.6% for the obsessive-compulsive personality (with variations of 7.6 to 14.6% depending on the sectors of

activity). Could it be that one employee in ten has a personality disorder?

These dysfunctional styles affect a great number of people and have serious consequences – for the subjects themselves, their professional activity, those around them, their colleagues, and the company. However, methods exist allowing them to be identified. It would therefore appear advisable to take into account these difficult personalities: firstly, to help individuals with their personal development, and secondly, during guidance and selection processes for positions in which the behaviours resulting from these disorders could be dangerous for the individual or the institution concerned.

References

F. DeFruyt et al., Assessing aberrant personality in managerial coaching: measurement issues and prevalence rates across employment sectors, in European Journal of Personality, in press, 2013.

B. Wille et al., Expanding and reconceptualizing aberrant personality at work: Validity of FFM aberrant personality tendencies and career outcomes, in Personnel Psychology, vol. 66, pp. 173-223, 2013.

T. Trull et al., Revised NESARC personality disorder diagnoses: gender, prevalence and comorbidity with substance dependence disorder, in Journal of Personality Disorders, vol. 24, pp. 412-426, 2010.

M. Yang et al., Personality pathology recorded by severity: national survey, in The British Journal of Psychiatry, vol. 197, pp. 193-199, 2010.

J.-P. Rolland et P. Pichot, Inventaire des tendances dysfonctionnelles, TD-12: Manuel, Paris, ECPA, 2007.

Jean-Pierre Rolland holds a PhD in psychology and is professor emeritus in Differential Psychology at the University of Paris West Nanterre La Défense. He was director of the EA 2931 Research Laboratory for ten years. He is a member and past president of AFERTP (French-speaking association for the study of personality disorders) and a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP). He has developed and adapted a set of personality and coping inventories: D5D, TD-12, PfPI, CISS, etc. He is co-author of a large number of articles in international magazines, and contributes as an expert and instructor for Talent Lens - ECPA.

About Us

Pearson TalentLens publishes scientific assessments that are used globally to hire and develop the 21st century workforce.

Our instruments measure Critical Thinking, problem solving, and a range of job skills to deliver data-driven insights that inform and clarify an organization's human capital decisions.

Learn more about disfunctional tendencies and other products and services at www.talentlens.co.uk