
How to Explain a Personality Disorder To a Patient or Significant Other

General

What we've found is that sometimes people end up seeing the world through a particular mindset that is limited and inflexible. Because of this, the way they respond or the way they do things can seem puzzling or strange or difficult to people in the outside world because it doesn't seem to make sense. And they don't seem to think that their way they see things or their way they do things is wrong or is a problem.

Their way of looking at the world makes complete sense to them, and the problem is that they may not be able to see things any other way, even if bad things happen because of the things they do or other people don't like them or some kind of information indicates that the way they see things is inaccurate. None of that makes any difference, and the person remains convinced that their viewpoint is right and that everyone else is wrong.

It can be very frustrating to deal with someone who works this way, because they don't make sense to us and they may behave in ways that aren't very pleasant and they don't seem able to see that their way they're doing things isn't working very well.

We're not really sure what causes someone to be this way. It seems to be some combination of inborn temperament and some kind of growing up that together result in this rigid and limited way of viewing themselves and others. But it is a very real phenomenon, and if you're going to deal successfully with this person, you'll need to start taking into account that they function differently than you expect them to or than most other people do.

Paranoid

What happens is that they tend to feel a lot of worry that other people are somehow mistreating them or are intending or planning to treat them badly. The problem is while it might not be true, it seems absolutely true to them and it seems virtually impossible to convince them that it isn't true. No amount of arguing, persuading, or evidence seems to be able to change their minds. They seem to have some scary picture in their mind or maybe some past experience that convinces them that other people are betraying them or mistreating them. And whatever it is that goes on in their mind seems more believable to them than other people's denials or reassurance or even the facts.

What can happen is that the person is so convinced that they're right that they try to uncover evidence to prove that they're right. They may ask questions over and over, search through other people's belongings, or try to trap or trick people into admitting that they're betraying them. They can also try to "stop" the mistreatment by becoming controlling, or demanding, or unreasonable, or preventing other people from going places or doing things. They may become accusatory and challenging. They may get madder and madder.

People they're directing these behaviors toward often feel scared, frustrated, confused, or outraged. So what often happens is that a vicious circle gets going where the person gets angrier and angrier and more and more accusatory, and other people get more and more defensive and frightened. Sometimes this cycle gets worse and worse and things can get really out of hand and somebody can get hurt or some other bad thing can happen

Emphasize:

The role of fear

The impotence of evidence and argument

The vicious circle of escalation

The danger

Schizoid

What happens is that they don't seem to respond to other people very well. They seem distant, muted, or like they don't care. Other people can do a variety of things in response, such as trying harder and harder to get them to respond, or to get angry that they won't respond, or to try to figure out what they might have done to offend the other person and resulted in their withdrawing. But none of it works.

But this person probably responds this way to pretty much everyone. They tend to be a loner, to not seem to be very interested in having relationships or friendships. While this is often puzzling to the people around them, the person seems quite content to be alone or to be involved in whatever kind of activity that most interests them. It might be a hobby, or a collection, or some kind of reading. But whatever it is, they would rather be involved in it than with other people. So if you're expecting to get your emotional needs met by them it can be very upsetting.

Emphasize:

- Their "comfort" being solitary
- The futility of attempts to engage them
- The generalized nature of their reaction

Schizotypal

What happens is that this person tends to see things differently from how most other people see things. Their reactions, their behavior, even the way they dress can seem strange or odd to other people. They may be uncomfortable with other people and seem nervous or anxious even when they know the other person pretty well.

Other people may get confused trying to “figure them out” or to get them to act in a more conforming way. This person probably has little interest in conforming, and prefers to do things in their own, unique, idiosyncratic way. This can be frustrating or even frightening to people who care about them, because their seemingly strange way of viewing things can cause them difficulty when it comes to having relationships or even working and holding a job.

Emphasize:

- Their unusual outlook and behavior
- Their disability
- The understandable upset of people around them

Antisocial

What happens is that this person feels like it's a "dog-eat-dog" world, and to make their way they have to try to get the better of everyone else. So they feel fully justified in doing things that most of us consider to be "wrong" because to them it's "every man for himself." So they may make promises that they don't keep, take advantage of situations, tell lies, or steal. To them it is all justified because it is their right to try to get by in the world, and they conclude that sometimes those kinds of things are required. They don't feel they're doing anything wrong, they feel it is everybody else's fault, and that they are never responsible.

What often happens is that other people try to make excuses for the way they are, or to explain that they're "not so bad." Generally people argue for this until they have been taken advantage of enough times to get "fed up" and then to not be willing to participate with the person again. Sometimes the person will make promise after promise that "they'll change," but most often once they are not in trouble, they go back to their old ways.

When people stop being able to be conned by the person, they usually move on to someone new who does not know, or believe, that they do those things and are vulnerable to them. In some cases the person can also escalate to violence or to criminal behavior in order to get what they want or to get back at someone else. Because of this it's usually best to be very careful when dealing with them and to have outside help and advice of how to handle them.

Emphasize:

Their pattern of violating agreements

The denial that other people have about them

The emptiness of most of their promises

The danger

Borderline

What happens is that this person reacts in ways that seem almost impossible to understand. You never know what to expect - one minute they're up, the next minute they're down. One minute they love you, the next minute they scream at you and tell you how awful they are. And then the next minute they act like nothing happened.

Because their reactions are often so extreme and change so quickly, people can refer to them as being unstable and unpredictable. It can seem like they just need to "snap out of it" or that they need "positive self-esteem." But despite all of the efforts from other people "to talk some sense into them," they usually continue to over-react and to make upset and trouble for themselves and others.

This person can be exasperating and frustrating to others, as no amount of reason or talking or persuading seems to make any difference. Sometimes they can seem like they understand, that they know they need to change, and the next minute they can insist that they are fine and that it is everybody else's fault. They can make what seems like a million promises and commitments to change, but if their bad feelings get triggered off in any way, they seem to sink back into chaos and crisis.

This person can be frightening and upsetting to others because they can seem to be in so much emotional turmoil and to do things that cause themselves so much trouble. They may threaten, or attempt, suicide. They may intentionally hurt themselves. They may seem to be in crisis after crisis after crisis.

Most times other people end up feeling powerless and helpless when trying to help this person. Other people can change from being caring and kind to being angry and punishing to being distant and withholding. But because the strong inner feelings that drive the chaos don't really change in response to anyone's reactions, all of the attempts ultimately fail. In fact, the patterns often don't change without outside help or sometimes simply years of hard experience and maturing.

Emphasize:

That strong internal feelings at the root of the patterns

That they seem unstable

That they create crises

That other people are impotent in trying to change them

That outside help and time are often needed

Histrionic

What happens is that this person seems to behave like a needy little kid. They seem overly emotional and have to be the center of attention all the time. When they feel like they don't have enough attention they can have temper tantrums, or sulk, or threaten to run away or kill themselves.

Other people may describe this person as "shallow" or "superficial." This person is probably highly concerned with how they look and are overly concerned with their clothes and their appearance. In fact, they might dress overly "sexy" or in inappropriately revealing ways. But they probably seem to act like they don't dress that way, and may even express shock that other people react to them like they are either being seductive or inappropriate.

Other people may get irritated or angry with this person because they are so demanding for attention. They may always change the conversation to themselves, and it may seem like they're using other people like an "audience." They may also seem to have little "common sense" and seem unable to handle even simple life tasks and solving life problems. They may seem helpless, like the classic "damsel in distress," even if the person is male.

Emphasize:

- Demand for attention

- Seductiveness

- Appearance of incompetence

Narcissistic

What happens is that this person makes other people mad because they seem to think they're better than everyone else. Their conversation may be focused solely on themselves, and no matter what someone else has or does they somehow seem to have or do "more or better." They seem to think that they can "do no wrong," and they may deny having even common human faults. That is, unless admitting to such things will make them look good.

In fact, this person is all about "looking good." They seem to have a tremendously inflated view of themselves, an unrealistically positive self-image. At the same time, they seem to be very touchy and to be easily wounded by any criticism or negative feedback, no matter how small or accurate. When criticized they can become enraged or say how "hurt" they feel, and the other person can feel frightened of this person's anger or can feel like they have done something terrible.

This person probably wants to be the center of attention at all times, and feels that they are entitled to special treatment. They expect others to admire them. They can even lie to make themselves more important and special, and they may become outraged or incensed if anyone accuses them of lying or exposes their lies.

Emphasize:

- Inflated self-image
- Easy wounding
- Rage at wounding
- Entitlement
- Manipulative lying

Avoidant

What happens is that this person seems painfully shy and afraid. They can seem like a frightened little kid who is afraid that other people won't like them. They probably have trouble in new situations, or striking up conversations, or revealing much information about themselves. Other people may find themselves trying to "draw them out." Other people may describe this person as someone who has "low self-esteem."

It may seem to other people like *this person just needs a self-esteem boost* to be able to be OK and to feel better. But this person may frustrate people by not following through on social engagements, or by being distant or elusive. Other people may want to get to know this person or to get close to them, and they may be puzzled by this person's unwillingness to get into a relationship. People may describe them as "furtive" or "hard to get to know."

Emphasize:

Shyness

Trouble in new situations

Frustrate attempts to help

Dependent

What happens is that this person seems to be unable to think for themselves. They don't trust themselves or their own judgment, so they may ask for constant help, or instruction, or reassurance. It's like they need someone else to run their life for them.

This can be flattering to other people at first, because this person seems really receptive to others' opinions. But then people probably start getting tired of it and don't want to have to tell them how to do everything. People may get irritated by them or feel like they're "hanging onto" them. Other people can start wanting to avoid them or to "get rid of them."

It can be hard, though, because it can look like this person really can't manage without someone else to tell them what to do. So other people can end up feeling in a bind of wanting to help them but being angry that this person needs so much advice and reassurance.

Emphasize:

- Lack of trust in themselves
- Need for constant caretaking
- Irritation of most people in response

Obsessive-Compulsive

What happens is that this person seems like a “control freak.” It’s like everything has to be their way, or perfect, or “just so.” It’s like they can’t just “go with the flow” or let things happen. They seem to have to plan, and direct, and control everything.

This person has a hard time with anything that’s messy, or inexact. They may be demanding that everyone measure up to what it seems like to other people are impossible standards to meet. And they seem so inflexible, like they can’t tolerate exceptions or any lack of perfection.

This person may seem to be “on edge” a lot, too. They may seem sort of nervous or high-strung, and to be over-reactive. In fact, they may get angry over small things being wrong or out of place, or they may seem to “make mountains out of molehills.”

Emphasize:

- Need for control
- Impossible standards
- Nervousness