SCHOOLS, TEACHERS & STUDENTS

Personality disorder in young people – the facts

Everyone has a personality. However, this may become a personality disorder when personality traits become pervasive, inflexible, and deviate markedly from cultural norms, causing significant impairment or distress for the individual.

Common experiences of young people with emerging personality disorder

For a young person with emerging difficulties the ordinary challenges of adolescence and young adulthood are heightened. Emotions are felt more intensely and interpersonal relationships can be particularly challenging. It is common for young people experiencing emerging difficulties to feel misunderstood, face stigma, and confusion as to what is going on for them. If a young person is experiencing emerging symptoms, they may not understand what is happening or why their journey towards adulthood is more difficult than that of their peers. It is important to recognise that young people may be experiencing these unique challenges and to maintain a caring position that is centred on compassion and understanding.

Young people with emerging difficulties often resort to unhelpful behaviours to manage their emotions such as self-harm, drug and alcohol use, binge eating, social withdrawal, aggressive behaviour, and risky sexual behaviour. While these behaviours result in short-term relief by numbing overwhelming emotion, over the long-term they lead to increased distress and poorer functioning.

Problems with emerging difficulties may also be confused with conduct disorder in young people. A key difference between these disorders is that people with conduct disorder violate societal norms and the rights of others through aggression, destruction, and deceitfulness. On the other hand, people with personality disorders often do not realise the consequences of their behaviour. The message that they are trying to send through their behaviour is often misinterpreted as manipulative, attention-seeking or simply “bad” behaviour. In reality, what the young person is often communicating is a need for attachment and for their pain to be heard.

Early warning signs of emerging personality disorder

- Unstable self-image
- Frequent mood swings
- Self-harming behaviour
- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Preoccupation with real or imagined abandonment
- Excessive self-criticism
- Disturbances in attention
- Impulsivity or risk-taking
- Abuse of drugs or alcohol
- Thinking about death or suicide
- Social isolation and difficulty making friends
- Aggressive behaviour or high irritability
What causes personality disorder?

The disorder emerges from a complex interaction of risk factors including: genetic and hereditability factors, adverse childhood experiences, peer victimisation, and attachment disorganisation. A diagnosis is possible in young people. However, if diagnostic criteria are not met but the young person is experiencing serious difficulties the diagnosis may be termed ‘emerging personality disorder’.

More research is needed to fully understand the causes of personality disorder.

Support for students, teachers and parents

Teachers, parents and health professionals should work collaboratively to support students affected by emerging personality disorder.

- Respond with compassion
- Talk honestly with students and encourage them to seek help from a health professional and school counsellors
- The student should be aware of and contribute to all decision-making
- Effective communication among staff, student, and carer is vital
- Ensure plans for students are in place for when they are stressed or when they are getting unwell
- Build on students’ strengths and keep good things that are helping the student
- Reflect on difficulties experienced in the school environment and make changes to keep routines simple and stress levels low

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.