



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 heritability 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

- Encourage positive coping strategies and use the support available at school
- Address negative attitudes in others and maintain a supportive approach
- Prioritise school attendance and make adjustments to prevent the student becoming overwhelmed
- Work to keep the young person engaged with their peers

Provide a calm, non-reactive environment as much as possible. When emotions flare up, do not fuel them but listen and respond in as calm a way as possible. The person may invite you to join them in reacting to their emotional feelings, however it can be helpful to model being calm. Try to be compassionate as this mental illness causes significant suffering. Try to provide a good enough relationship so that the person feels a connection with you that provides hope. Recognise the importance of social integration with peers and the community as much as possible and promote safety when feelings become overwhelming

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.

Credits: This factsheet complements a filmed resource 'Chloe's Story: Helping Schools Help with Mental Health'. The film was developed as a training tool as part of a broader initiative aimed at assisting school staff in identifying, supporting and managing young people with severe and complex mental health concerns. As part of this initiative, a guide has been developed which aims to help schools work effectively with young people that have complex mental health issues. It provides guidance to understand and respond to emerging personality disorder, trauma history, self-harm and suicidal behaviour, and other difficulties with identity, emotions and relationships. We would like to acknowledge and thank the consumers, families, and caregivers who have shared their lived experiences which have informed the development of this film. Film by the Project Air Strategy for Personality Disorders. Original film script developed by Brin Grenyer and film directed by Nick Pollack from Louder Than Words films. This project is supported by the NSW Ministry of Health in partnership with the NSW Department of Education.