

# Personality Disorders and the Workplace

Kevin Weitz

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5) defines a personality disorder as an *“enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual’s culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time and leads to distress or impairment”*. Cavaola and Lavender (2000) describe personality disorders as a *“special group of psychological disorders of which the general public and most workplaces are generally unaware”*. These are potentially more destructive, they say, because they are generally difficult for the layperson to identify, and undoubtedly even more difficult to deal with in the work environment. Personality disorders are long standing disturbances in personality that usually begin in adolescence and continue through adulthood. The authors describe how these behaviorally affected individuals manifest in the workplace with repetitive patterns of dysfunctional behaviors that are disturbing and often destructive. The DSM-5 describes eleven types of personality disorders plus a category of “other”:

- Paranoid
- Schizoid
- Schizotypal
- Antisocial
- Borderline
- Histrionic
- Narcissistic
- Avoidant
- Dependent
- Obsessive Compulsive
- Personality change due to another medical condition
- Other and unspecified

This essay will focus on disorder one through ten but will not discuss eleven and twelve.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) sets guidelines for diagnosing mental disorders. This “bible” of abnormal psychology provides a common reference for all professionals in the field utilize standard definitions and vocabulary. While others may exist, professionals note that there is not enough definitive research on these outliers in order to include them in the DSM at this time. The DSM-5 clusters these disorders into three categories, but does indicate that these categories have “*serious limitations and have not been consistently validated*”. Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) are quick to comment that there is no one “pure” type, but these individuals can have various intensities of their disorder and can manifest traits of several of them, thus making it quite difficult to diagnose, even for clinical professionals.

**A Cluster** – This cluster includes the Paranoid Personality Disorder who is characterized by being overly suspicious and distrusting of others. The Schizoid personality Disorder is aloof and avoids social interactions. The Schizotypal Personality Disorder displays bizarre behaviors and comes across as odd and weird. Some professionals describe that this cluster is related to the more severe psychotic disorder of schizophrenia, but in a milder form.

**B Cluster** – The B Cluster includes the Narcissistic personality disorder which is characterized by a sense of excessive self-esteem and entitlement. Their constant need to be admired often draws them to positions of leadership and power. The Histrionic Personality Disorder includes behaviors of being overly emotional, shallow in relationships and in excessive need of attention. Individuals with Antisocial Personality Disorder lack a sense of morality and empathy for the well-being of others and the Borderline Personality tend to be excessively moody and angry, sometimes to the point of suicide, tend to have disruptive and emotionally intense relationships and lack a sense of identity.

**C Cluster** – The C Cluster includes people who tend to be excessively anxious. The Dependent Personality Disorder also referred to as co-dependent, are overly reliant on others for a sense of security and self-esteem. The Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder is overly moralistic, a perfectionist and highly critical of others.

**NOTE:** The following descriptions of personality disorders are taken primarily from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Where other sources are included, these are specifically referenced. Descriptions on how these personality disorders may manifest in the workplace are either my own interpretations or those of other sources, in which case these are referenced.

## **Paranoid Personality Disorder**

This disorder is manifest as a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others and their motives and intent. They assume that others are out to exploit, harm or deceive them even if there is little or no evidence to this. They often express feelings about being deeply injured by others even though they cannot substantiate this. These people are preoccupied with scrutinizing the intentions of others for evidence that they are plotting against them. They find it difficult to believe that others actually demonstrate loyalty or trust. These individuals struggle to confide in others making it difficult to develop close relationships. They will tend to avoid answering personal questions, thinking that this

information could be used against them. Causal remarks made by others are often interpreted as demeaning or threatening. They tend to hold long term grudges and are unwilling to forgive perceived insults or slights made by others. They tend to respond aggressively to any perceived slight or insult from others making it difficult to maintain constructive relationships for long periods.

### **How the Paranoid Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

Organizational success is almost always based on some element of trust. It is not difficult to imagine how this disorder would not only struggle personally, but would potentially be destructive to, for example, a team's morale and effectiveness. With the workplace of the future being more based on agile teams forming and moving from one project to another, the need to innately trust others – at least initially – is essential, and then to base trust on factual evidence. These individuals are struggling to do this. Moreover, in this “hustle and bustle” of working together under time and cost pressures, tension is inevitable and a degree of team competitiveness is not uncommon – this disorder would tend to misinterpret common competition and minor frustrations amongst team members as plots to make the individual fail or as targeted backstabbing. The holding of grudges and aggressive responses to team members would quickly alienate this type of personality from the team. A greater challenge would be when this personality type has emerged as a team leader and has greater leverage across all members of the team. I would imagine that cases such as this, in which this personality type is able to escalate to a team leader position is in industries, such as science, medical and engineering where intelligent people can progress good engineers for example, and then be promoted simply because they are good engineer rather than a good people manager.

Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) describe the likely behaviors of an individual with Paranoid Personality Disorder in a management position. This person is likely to be extremely distrustful and suspicious of subordinates, often thinking that their reports are scheming to undermine their effectiveness and will tend to be defensive with good ideas posed by team members. They may misinterpret high levels of motivation amongst peers or subordinates as an attempt to show them up or get their jobs. Developing talent is likely not a role that these individuals will be good at. They are likely to be micromanagers given that they will be suspicious and distrustful of what subordinates are doing. Of pivotal importance for the paranoid manager is to feel in total charge of everyone in their work domains. They will often respond to circumstances of uncertainty in an extremely harsh manner if they feel out of control. Interacting with the paranoid individual must be centered on their need to be in control. Be as open and transparent with these individuals as possible so as to avoid any possibility of distrust developing. Be cautious of being overly inquisitive about them personally, as this interest can be easily misconstrued. Cavaiola and Lavender also suggest caution about common office joking or teasing however benign it may be given the potential of these individuals believing that they are being picked on, or are the butt of jokes. Effectively, the most effective approach is to interact openly but with caution and to keep the work relationship friendly but at arm's length.

## Schizoid Personality Disorder

DSM-5 describes this disorder as a pervasive pattern of detachment from social relationships and a restricted range of expression of emotions in interpersonal settings. They appear to be indifferent to any opportunities to develop close relationships and do not seem to obtain any satisfaction from being part of a family or other social group. They seem unaffected by the criticism or compliments from others—they do not appear to care what others think about them. They are oblivious to the normal subtleties of social interaction. They tend not to respond to subtle social cues, so they appear as inept or socially “bland”. For example, they will tend not to reciprocate socially expected smiles or nods that acknowledge social connectedness. They rarely experience emotions of joy or anger and can appear cold and aloof. The Schizoid Personality Disorder is indicated by the manifestation of four or more of the following:

- Neither desires nor enjoys close relationships including family interaction
- Prefers solitary activities
- Has little interest in sexual experiences with another person
- Takes pleasure in few activities if any
- Lacks close friends other than first degree relatives
- Appears indifferent to praise or criticism from others
- Demonstrates emotional coldness and detachment

### How the Schizoid Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace

In most organizations today, social interactions are common. Companies invest huge amounts of time and money to energize and inspire their employees for the best possible performance. From minor “pats on the back” for a job well done to a more formal recognition for performance, the Schizoid Personality will likely fail to be inspired and will also be unlikely to display any form of positive reaction or pleasure. Similarly, the poor performing individual being coached or managed will also tend to be unaffected by strong criticism from their boss. This appearance of lack of caring could be interpreted as lack of commitment to their work and to the company’s goals and aspirations. Given that these individuals appear directionless and tend to “drift” in their goals, the likelihood of them being strongly focused high performers is low. DSM-5 notes that these individuals will likely operate best in work conditions of isolation. One can imagine that the workplace of the future, allowing work to be conducted remotely via the virtual technologies over the internet, with little need for direct interactions with others, provides opportunities for this personality type. Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) observe that the field of engineering appears to attract people with Schizoid Personality Disorder. They can be very successful in this field and as a result of this technical success be promoted to managerial levels. As the authors say, “this is where the problems begin”. Precisely the kind of factors that make these individuals good

engineers, namely thinking, logic and analytical endeavors, but not the kind of people skills required of a management role. These individuals will tend to be entirely focused on the technical task at hand and will have little or no to emotional quotient.

## **Schizotypal Personality Disorder**

The Schizotypal Personality Disorder is characterized by a pervasive pattern of social and interpersonal limitations and a reduced capacity for close relationships as well as by cognitive and perceptual distortions and eccentric behaviors. These individuals often have ideas of reference (but not delusions of reference), namely incorrect or distorted interpretations of casual experiences or incidences and external events by assigning unusual meaning to them specifically. They are likely to be highly superstitious or preoccupied with paranormal phenomena that are outside their normal context or culture. They may believe they have special powers to sense future events or read the thoughts of others or have special controls over others or influence over events. They may exhibit perceptual alternations such as hearing voices or sensing that someone is present when they are not. Their speech may appear unusual or incoherent and include idiosyncratic phraseology.

### **How the Schizotypal Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

Because these individuals often have an odd appearance, for example in the way they dress as well as in their speech, odd speech patterns and unusual perceptual experiences, they will typically find it difficult to fit in the workplace. They are likely to be suspicious of co-workers, thinking that colleagues may be plotting against them. They are uncomfortable around other people, especially if these individuals are unknown to them. They prefer to be by themselves, and therefore would struggle in a team environment, particularly where there is a high need for collaboration – most often the Schizoid will avoid these opportunities or expectations. Exacerbating this is their predisposition to be suspicious of others. Given their predisposition to present as being odd or eccentric, co-workers will likely be uncomfortable in their presence and avoid being associated with them. This is likely to advance the perception that others are talking about them and possibly plotting to undermine them.

It is best to respect and understand the schizoid's need to be alone and have distance. When interacting with them, do not be overly inquisitive, but rather ask about general work issues and other benign non personal issues or current affairs. Do not be surprised or react negatively if the response you get from this interaction is disinterest. Given the lethargy of these individuals, it is preferable to make specific recommendations about what work should be accomplished and how, rather than pose a question while expecting a detailed and proactive response. If you are the schizoid's superior, consider using technology such as teleconferencing to provide the individual some a sense of privacy and distance. This might include a quiet cube away from others, or even working from home.

## **Antisocial Personality Disorder**

DSM-5 notes that Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD) is also referred to as psychopathy, sociopathy or dissocial personality disorder. Interestingly, Babiak and Hare (2006) differentiate the psychopath from

Antisocial Personality Disorder, which they describe as a broad diagnostic category and may include the psychopath but also may not. They indicate that psychopathy specifically includes such personality traits as lack of empathy, grandiosity, and shallow emotions that are not necessary for the diagnosis of APD. Deceit and manipulation are the major characteristics of this disorder and behaviors in which the basic rights and other societal norms are repeatedly violated. This conduct falls into four categories; aggression towards people and animals, destruction of property, deceitfulness or theft or other kinds of violations of rules or laws. They may repeatedly perform acts that are grounds for arrest, such as threatening others, destroying property and violence. They also tend to display a reckless disregard for their own safety. They can display extreme lack of responsibility. They also demonstrate little remorse for their acts and for damage they have caused. They tend to be callous, cynical and contemptuous of the feelings, rights and suffering of others. Exacerbating the damage that can be caused by these individuals is the likelihood for them to appear self-assured, while this excess will tend to appear cocky and overly opinionated. They can also display a high level of charm, which will appear superficial.

### **How the Antisocial Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

These individuals display an extreme lack of responsibility in the workplace. They will manifest this by, for example, having long absences from work with no rationale or excuse. They tend to have long periods of unemployment with no plan for obtaining an income. They will tend to default on debts, and may have a tendency to embezzle funds or steal from their employers. Their potential to be charming and verbally facile creates the opportunity for them to appear initially as the “wunderkind” in the workplace; however, this superficiality can become evident quite quickly because of a disregard for company rules and boundaries.

Babiak and Hare (2006) note that some corporate cultures may actually attract the psychopathic personality. Cultures characterized by aggressiveness and success at all costs might find the psychopathic personality appealing, especially in early stages of interviews where the psychopath is at his or her charming best. Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) comment that there are many instances where ruthlessness, cunning, manipulation, deceit and unbridled ambition are viewed as essential characteristics in order to advance in some organizations. No wonder, anecdotally, it appears that so many senior executives exhibit these kinds of behaviors.

Dealing with individuals with APD in the workplace can be tricky. Cavaiola and Lavender suggest caution if you suspect this disorder, as the excessive charm that individuals exhibit can be disarming and they can use many subtle techniques to draw you into their attempts to control and manipulate. The authors suggest the following:

- Set clear boundaries about how they attempt to interact with you. For example, if the individual takes liberties to be overly friendly and puts their arm around your shoulders in apparent friendship – possibly too early in the relationship – be very clear, while being courteous, that this makes you feel uncomfortable and he or she should refrain. Be firm. Do not leave personal information or items in your office or on your desk which are of a sensitive personal nature. Keep security passwords and personal items like keys away from view.

- Keep detailed notes of any indiscretions that may occur.
- Keep someone you trust informed of any concerns you may have about the APD individual's behavior. Be specific but don't speculate or interpret when you do this, simply state your concerns factually.
- Ask for help if you are struggling to deal with the APD's behavior. If you have access to a trusted advisor or counselor, do so.
- APD individuals are masters of manipulation - do not blame yourself if you like you have been manipulated into behavior that is uncharacteristic for you – avoid getting deeper into any scenario that is uncomfortable for you. Rather be transparent about the issue and talk to either counselors or trusted people as early as possible.

## **Borderline Personality Disorder**

The Borderline Personality Disorder manifests as a pervasive pattern of instability regarding interpersonal relationships and their self-image is marked by impulsivity. They usually have a self-image based on being evil and at times have feelings that they don't exist at all. These individuals make frantic efforts to avoid real or perceived abandonment or rejection or separation or the loss of external structure. They are intensely impacted by external environmental circumstances. They may experience inappropriate levels of fear and anger at even temporary periods of separations, for example, where a caregiver may end a session earlier than expected or may arrive a few minutes late. They have an intolerance of being alone and need to have others with them.

These individuals have long term patterns of unstable relationships. They may initially idealize caregivers or partners, demand an extraordinary amount of their time and share highly personal and intimate details about themselves very early in the relationship. This idealization may quickly turn to devaluing them when they perceive that the caregiver or partner is not caring enough or not providing enough personal time or attention. These shifts in attitude to others can be quick and dramatic. They may display extreme sarcasm, enduring bitterness and abusive verbal outbursts.

There is the likelihood of marked and persistent instability in self-image and sense of self. These shifts may manifest as sudden changes in personal goals, values, career aspirations and/or life goals and objectives. These individuals demonstrate worse performance in less structured educational or work environments. They may display high levels of impulsivity in the form of gambling, spending money irresponsibly, binge eating, substance abuse, reckless driving and physical violence. They may also display recurrent suicidal behaviors or threats, or self-mutilation. They display instability of mood, manifest as intense dysphoria, irritability or anxiety. They easily become bored and express chronic feelings of emptiness.

## **How the Borderline Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

These individuals are likely to be attracted to highly structured work environments in which they are working closely with other people. They will likely attempt to develop close relationships with both co-workers and supervisors. They are likely to idealize these individuals initially. Problems may occur when these relationships do not provide the nurturing they need and expect. For example, if a supervisor who is under work stress appears dismissive or is non-attentive during a meeting, these individuals are prone to reacting rapidly and dramatically with sarcasm and anger, thus damaging these relationships. As these co-workers or managers then pull back from the relationship with the person, so the Borderline Personality is likely to interpret this as abandonment and may react with angry outbursts or panic and anxiety. These real or perceived losses of relationships can then result in these individuals suddenly changing career goals or direction. They are also prone to giving up just before they are about to potentially achieve a significant work or educational goal, making it difficult to progress in their careers.

Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) comment that people with this disorder probably present the greatest challenge to the organizational structure because they have an inability to develop ongoing, stable and sane relationships. They have a profound ability to disrupt the lives of workers around them. Often this disruption emerges from their tendency to have wild swings in their relationships. For example, the Borderline moves from one extreme of thinking and saying that their boss is the best ever, lavishing praise and soon thereafter, after perhaps some perception of being rejected, will swing into hatred and verbal outrage. Subsequently, the Borderline personality can decline into depression and a deep sense of worthlessness.

Cavaiola and Lavender comment that working for a borderline boss can be a “living hell”. They describe that these individuals are the most toxic to work with, to the point of potential emotional damage. The more positional power they have, the worse they can be. The authors caution about antagonizing these individuals. Do not engage in confrontational arguments and avoid escalations by simply making them feel validated by saying something like “I hear you” or “I understand the way you feel” (even if you don’t). In the most severe cases, the authors recommend changing jobs because there is little one can do to work with the borderline individual. Indeed, in the extreme, they can be dangerous.

## **Histrionic Personality Disorder**

This disorder manifests as a pervasive and excessive emotionality and attention-seeking behavior. These individuals are overly dramatic in behavior with the purpose of attempting to gain attention and constantly be “the life of the party”. If they feel they are not the center of attention, they will often do something dramatic to bring attention back to themselves in the form of making up dramatic stories or making a scene. This excessive emotionality which can initially present as being charming and flattering, (but excessively so), can evolve into inappropriate flirtatiousness, and sexually provocative and seductive behavior. These behaviors are not only directed at people to whom the person is romantically attracted, but also occur in a wide variety of contexts including occupational and professional which can be highly inappropriate in these situations.

These individuals often use physical appearance to gain attention on themselves. They expend excessive effort and money on clothing and grooming. They will often “fish” for compliments regarding how they look and can become easily and excessively upset by critical comments about their appearance or by a photograph that they regards as unflattering.

People with this disorder have a style of speech that is excessively impressionistic or lacking in substance. For example, strong opinions are expressed with emotionality suggesting a deep connection with the topic, but they are often unable to provide detail when questioned by others. Individuals with this disorder are easily influenced by others or by current fads. They may be overly trusting and gullible especially when interacting with people in positions of power who they see as being able to solve their problems and provide them with some sense of attention and importance. They often consider relationships stronger than they really are, and can present themselves as being overly familiar with people whom they barely know.

### **How the Histrionic Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

These individuals will tend to visibly pay more attention to themselves versus the work for which they are accountable. They are likely to be dramatic and attention getting in what they say they can do in order to get attention versus what they actually produce in the long run. Their initial, but superficial charm can become irritating to managers and supervisors when their need for attention is excessive and when they lack delivery on goals. These individuals may be inappropriately flirtatious and to the point of overstepping company policy. Co-workers may feel uncomfortable and may lodge formal complaints about inappropriate comments about their appearance. They will tend to demand excessive attention from managers and constantly seek approval and public comments that make them look good. They may also easily latch onto and will be easily influenced by senior leaders who are able to manipulate them by providing the attention they crave. These are the personalities that are overly dramatic in meetings and other group work settings, but make little meaningful contribution.

Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) note that it would seem unlikely that someone suffering from Histrionic Personality Disorder would rise to positions of leadership given their lack of emotional control; however, given their assertive and outgoing personality and high energy levels, they often chose and are at least quite successful in careers involving sales, marketing, or politics. The authors comment that when these individuals do rise to leadership positions, it can “spell disaster” for those working for them. The authors suggest being fully aware that these individuals will likely take credit for your work at every opportunity and because they are such blatant sales people, will likely get away with it. Be cautious not to get caught up in their drama, storytelling and gossip. Given their tendency to be in crisis mode all the time, getting caught up in their emotional roller coaster can be draining. Rather keep your distance. HPDs are excessive in their needs for you to get involved in their drama, and given their charm, this can be quite easy in the early stages of knowing these individuals.

## **The Narcissistic Personality Disorder**

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, extreme need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for the feelings and needs of others. These individuals overestimate their own abilities and overstate their accomplishments often appearing boastful and pretentious. They are likely to simply assume that others also view them and their accomplishments similarly and may be stunned or angry when they find that others do not provide the praise that they feel is justified. They firmly believe that they are superior or unique and expect others to view and treat them as such. They are likely to harshly devalue the contributions of others. They will often express that they can only be understood and appreciated by other gifted or high status people. They believe their needs are above and more important than “normal” people. They will tend to want to be associated only with “the best” in whatever field they are involved with, be that academic, career or simply their personal doctor or hairdresser.

These individuals require constant and excessive admiration and their self-esteem can be very fragile if they do not receive it. They are often charming, but this is almost always self-serving and they will tend to fish for compliments. They have a grandiose sense of entitlement—for example, not feeling like they should have to stand in a queue at an airport like “normal” people. When they are not catered to or receive the kind of praise they expect and demand, they can become puzzled or furious.

Narcissistic personalities display a lack of empathy for others and have difficulty recognizing the needs and feelings of others. They assume that others are consumed with their welfare. They tend to discuss their own needs at great and lengthy detail, but become impatient and dismissive when others want to discuss their own feelings. They may be oblivious to their insensitivity and the hurt they create in others. They project a sense of emotional coldness and arrogance towards others. They are often patronizing and snobbish.

### **How the Narcissistic Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

These individuals are likely to expect or demand special treatment and be “hailed” for their profound successes, power, brilliance or beauty—at a level way beyond their real capabilities. In the workplace where tangible performance is expected, these individuals will likely either to struggle and possibly express anger and astonishment at their bosses and coworkers for not placing them on a perpetual pedestal. More destructive is the likelihood that they will be calculating and devious in their work relationships in order to get what they want at the expense of others. They are likely to display disdain for “lesser” people they consider weak and abuse the willingness of others to assist. For example, if the narcissistic personality is in a leadership role, they may expect total loyalty and overwork their team members, yet do little work themselves. They attribute all of the successful outcomes to their own superior capabilities and none to the team members who may, for example, have worked over weekends or overnight to produce the results.

Quoted by Cavaiola and Lavender (2000), Levinson (1994) suggested that “organizational narcissism” often occurs when corporate and political executives ascend to higher levels in organizational power

structures. The higher an individual rises up the higher one's self esteem becomes, and the less candid is the feedback one receives. The combination of these two, says Levinson, can give rise to narcissistic inflation that leads, in turn, to overconfidence and a sense of entitlement. This can produce an inflated self-image beyond ones real capabilities, and contempt for other individuals and organizations.

Working with a narcissistic boss can be exhausting. These individuals are likely to expect ridiculous hours of work without ever considering your personal situation. I recall working with an individual in a leadership position who expected her team to work over a long Memorial weekend, and set a team conference call late on the final day of the Memorial day weekend. While we invested many hours in preparation for this meeting, she did not show up, only to find out she was on a boat relaxing with friends. When we raised this issue the following day, she was completely nonchalant and dismissive about ruining the long weekend for her team and their families. Fortunately it is possible to manage these individuals more than some other disorders. Cavaiola and Lavender describe that one should "stick to your agenda, and not theirs". Clearly I missed this aspect of their advice in my previous example. Talking with the narcissist is possible. However, this dialogue needs to be presented in a way that lets them know that you are able to help them be successful. In my pervious example, I was able to sit down with this individual and both firmly set boundaries, as well as provide coaching that her team would perform much better (and she would look better) if she provided some support to her team. As Cavaiola and Lavender describe, providing constructive and balanced feedback is useful with these individuals, but they must feel it is for their benefit.

## **Avoidant Personality Disorder**

Individuals with Avoidant Personality Disorder demonstrate a pervasive pattern of inhibition, feelings of inadequacy and excessive sensitivity to any form of criticism. These individuals will avoid activities in which there is significant inter-personal contact for fear of criticism, disapproval for rejection by others. They will avoid or reject new opportunities for fear that they will fail or be criticized. In any social situation their initial assumption is that people will be critical and disapproving. They will tend to project as shy and acting with restraint and will likely avoid talking about themselves to protect themselves from appearing inadequate.

These individuals have a very low threshold for detecting criticism. The slightest hint of disapproval will result in extreme hurt. They will tend to be shy to the extreme, inhibited and will try to be 'invisible' in social settings to avoid putting their fragile wellbeing in the hands of others. These individuals believe they are inferior, socially inept and personally unappealing to others. They will therefore tend to have a very restricted and insular lifestyle.

### **How the Avoidant Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

Individuals with Avoidant Personality Disorder are likely to struggle in the typical workplace other than the most nurturing and supportive. Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) note that it is uncommon to find a Avoidant individual in a management role, unless they have been promoted because of technical expertise versus people management skills. The Avoidant manager will likely be vague, provide little

guidance or direction, and will not provide support or “have the backs” of their team. They are also likely to have multiple excuses for why things don’t get done. However, the avoidant personality can be talented and hard working. Cavaiola and Lavender note that their hard work can be an attempt to cover up their sense of perceived deficiencies but given the right support and consideration they can be productive.

The internet has likely been a significant boon to these individuals—who may be more likely to work remotely in the “safety” of their homes without having to brave the social hustle and bustle of the normal workplace. In normal work environments, they are likely to be seen as weak and ineffectual, unwilling to take any form of risk or challenge that they may perceive as potentially embarrassing or where they may be shown as inadequate. Their fearful and anxious demeanor may elicit ridicule from others who perceive them as pathetic underachievers, and in turn this ridicule will confirm their worst fears and doubts about themselves.

Cavaiola and Lavender describe that if a avoidant individual actually rises to managerial level, one needs to anticipate that they will not take risks or support your proposals that have any implication of being risky. Putting pressure on them will not work, rather offer to assist and find ways to present ideas in a non-threatening manner. As a co-worker, an avoidant individual can be a good friend if they decide to trust you. They are likely to need constant reassuring, and support, but are likely to be difficult to work with if you are dependent on them delivering work that you need. Reacting with impatience or annoyance will make things worse, so being helpful and supportive is the best approach.

## **Dependent Personality Disorder**

The Dependent Personality Disorder is manifest by a pervasive and excessive need to be taken care of that leads to submissive and clinging behavior and intense fears of separation. These submissive behaviors are designed to elicit caregiving and develop out of the self-perception that they are unable to take care of themselves without the help of others. These individuals have great difficulty making simple decisions for themselves, such as what clothes to wear or whether to take an umbrella in case of rain. They present themselves as extremely passive and submissive to others, allowing others to take responsibility for all major aspects of their lives—for example what course of study to take, what kind of work to pursue and what friends to have.

Through fear of losing the support or approval from others, individuals with this disorder have great difficulty expressing disagreement with others, especially with those on whom they are dependent. They will feel so unable to function alone that they will often agree with things that they know are wrong. These individuals are unable to express resistance. They will tend to submit to the demands of others even if these demands are unreasonable.

These individuals have great difficulty taking the initiative to begin anything, such as a project or doing anything independently. They lack basic self-confidence to complete tasks and believe they need help to finish what they started. They basically believe that others are better than they are despite possible evidence to the contrary. They visibly present themselves as being inept and requiring constant care and

support. They are more likely to function if there is constant assurance from another that they are being supervised.

Individuals with this disorder will tend to volunteer or agree to do tasks that are unpleasant or disagreeable to them simply in order to maintain approval and support from others. This makes them easily manipulated or taken advantage of. They will tend to urgently and indiscriminately seek other dependent relationships when another ends.

### **How the Dependent Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

The individual with Dependent Personality Disorder (DPD) will predictably struggle in a normal work environment in which employees are expected to take the initiative and complete tasks without much supervision. It is likely that these individuals would struggle even in the initial hiring process of a career search given that they present themselves as helpless and incapable. They are only likely to function in work situations in which they have clear and ongoing nurturing and support. They are also likely to need work that is more predictable and repetitive versus any projects that require initiative and risk. It is likely that these individuals could be taken advantage of in the workplace by unscrupulous bosses, who gain their confidences and then require them to do work that is unpleasant or even dangerous or unethical.

Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) note that it is unlikely that these individuals will reach leadership or managerial positions, but if they do it is more likely that they move into these positions because they have pleased their bosses rather than basic managerial competence. They make better followers than leaders. If they do rise to these positions, they are likely to strive to create harmonious work environments in which there is not confrontation with anyone. They are likely to be consensus builders to the extreme, avoiding making difficult decisions. The DPD will want to talk things through endlessly and avoid making decisions in isolation. However, for team members who want to get their ideas recognized, and can work with the DPD in an understanding way, there is the opportunity to shine and to be recognized. In these cases, one can receive a lot of support from the DPD boss, because it can be viewed as win-win. There is the potential for successful outcomes with these individuals, however frustrating the process may be at times.

### **Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder**

The primary feature of this disorder is a preoccupation with orderliness, perfectionism and interpersonal control at the expense of openness and efficiency. These individuals attempt to maintain a sense of control through painstaking attention to rules, trivial details, procedures, lists, schedules or formats to the degree that the primary objective of whatever exercise they are involved in is lost or forgotten. They are excessively careful and prone to repeatedly check for possible mistakes and recheck that everything they are doing is correct or perfect, without adequate focus on the intended outcome and timelines. Their allocation to tasks is poor, and they will tend to invest time on trivial detail versus keeping the point of the exercise or project at the top of their mind. Deadlines will tend to be missed and important aspects of the individual's life that are not the current focus can fall into disarray.

These individuals have trouble relaxing and allocating time to leisure. They display excessive devotion to work productivity to the exclusion of relaxation and friends. When they do take a vacation they are likely to take work along with them so they can feel productive. If they do engage in sports or hobbies they will approach them as serious tasks that require hard work and great attention to detail. Their emphasis will be on perfect performance versus fun and enjoyment. They are likely to be harsh with others and will tend to enforce rigid rules and follow inflexible moral standards and standards of performance. They can be ruthlessly critical of their own mistakes and those of others. They are also likely to be rigidly deferential to authority and rules. They will insist on exact compliance with no opportunity for contextual flexibility or extenuating circumstances.

This disorder is manifest by being unable to discard worn out or worthless objects. They can become hoarders of useless items.

These individuals are very reluctant to delegate responsibility to others. They feel everything must be perfect and they can do this alone. If responsibility is delegated, they will insist that it be done their way with no flexibility. They will become irritated with others who suggest alternative ways of doing things, even if these alternatives are clearly more efficient. They are so concerned about doing things the one correct way that they struggle to go along with the ideas of others. They struggle to deal with changes in the way work might need to get done to meet changing requirements. Co-workers are likely to become frustrated by this rigidity. The Obsessive Compulsive Disorder sufferer will often argue that "*it is the principle of the thing*" that it has to be done a certain way.

### **How the Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder may manifest in the workplace**

The summary above sourced from the DSM-5 provides a vivid picture of this type of personality disorder in the workplace. Given my many years of work in a highly regulated banking environment, it is interesting to look back at how this personality disorder would likely be regarded as a high performer in many situations. However, in the rapidly changing work environment of today, at least in most industries, these individuals would likely struggle. I can imagine these individuals operating comfortably in many aspects of the military, but not in the creative, rapidly changing work environment of "knowledge work" ( for example, in software engineering and design) and particularly where there is intense pressure to "break the rules" to beat the competition and find innovative ways to shorten processes and procedures. Given their struggle to delegate responsibility, or to give recognition to others who may have succeeded by "breaking the rules", they are likely to struggle in a dynamic team environment.

These individuals tend to be project themselves as overly serious, highly controlled or stilted and may appear uncomfortable in the presence of others, particularly in a work environment of "organized chaos"—where people are being innovative and are often engaged in brainstorming forums. Given their tendency to be stubborn, they are unlikely to be easily accepted into this kind of team environment. More and more, as the workplace is undergoing increasing levels of change in which the average individual is likely to struggle, those with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder are likely to seek out alternative work environments and opportunities.

Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) note that the characteristics of the Obsessive Compulsive often advance to leadership positions, particularly in organizations emphasizing rules and structure. Yet, these strengths are often their failure points as managers. They are likely to be task masters, lacking in emotional expression, nitpicky on trivial detail versus achieving good results. They will place productivity and efficiency above all else. They are unlikely to provide encouragement or praise for a job well done, because this will simply be their expectation. For reward and recognition they are likely to be the manager who responds “your reward is that you have a job”.

Cavaiola and Lavender recommend the following techniques to deal with the OCD person:

- Be very clear about expectations and the implications of these expectations. Suggest other ways of achieving the same result with simpler but equally effective methods. Be detailed and explicit in your ideas.
- Set boundaries about your work-life balance. Be specific and firm.
- Be a team player, but be clear not to stray into allowing the OCD to push you beyond your agreed boundaries.
- Be complimentary to these individuals in order to allay their anxieties or insecurities. But be sure these are sincere.
- Avoid arguments or debates. OCD’s cannot admit being wrong. Rather, make them feel like they might have inspired the idea (however hard this might be at times).
- Don’t expect praise or emotional support – this is simply a fact of life when working with an OCD individual.

## Conclusions

The title of Babiak and Hare’s (2006) book, *Snakes in Suits*, is very appropriate. I have encountered many of these snakes in suits over the years. Cavaiola and Lavender (2000) similarly describe the tremendous damage that employees with various kinds of personality disorders can have on an organization:

*“... this problem is like a hidden cancer slowly and persistently sucking the life out of productive and viable organizations by creating inefficient management, sexual harassment, excessive litigation, escalating expenses and job related stress. The magnitude of the problems these people cause for their organizational settings are of such as astounding proportions that they may be immeasurable”.*

I don’t think this can be overstated. Cavaiola and Lavender note that 80% of people they surveyed reported having to deal with someone in the workplace that created huge amounts of disruption and stress. I’m surprised that it was not 100%.

## References

American Psychiatric Association (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Fifth Edition. DSM-5. American Psychiatric Publishing

Babiak, P. and Hare, R. (2006). Snakes in Suits. Harper Collins.

Cavaiola, A. and Lavender, N. (2000). Toxic Coworkers. New Harbinger Publications.