

Dependent Personality Disorder

What is dependent personality disorder?

Dependent personality disorder (DPD) is one of a group of conditions called anxious personality disorders, which are marked by feelings of nervousness and fear. DPD also is marked by helplessness, submissiveness, a need to be taken care of and for constant reassurance, and an inability to make decisions.

DPD is one of the most frequently diagnosed personality disorders. It appears to occur equally in men and women, and usually appears in early to middle adulthood.

What are the symptoms of dependent personality disorder?

People with DPD become emotionally dependent on other people and spend great effort trying to please others. People with DPD tend to display needy, passive, and clinging behavior, and have a fear of separation. Other common characteristics of this personality disorder include the following:

- Inability to make decisions, even everyday decisions, without the advice and reassurance of others
- Avoidance of personal responsibility; avoidance of jobs that require independent functioning and positions of responsibility
- Intense fear of abandonment and a sense of devastation or helplessness when relationships end; often move right into another relationship when one ends
- Over-sensitivity to criticism
- Pessimism and lack of self-confidence, including a belief that they are unable to care for themselves
- Avoidance of disagreeing with others for fear of losing support or approval
- Inability to start projects
- Difficulty being alone
- Willingness to tolerate mistreatment and abuse from others
- Placing the needs of their caregivers above their own
- Tendency to be naïve and to live in fantasy

What causes dependent personality disorder?

Although the exact cause of dependent personality disorder is not known, it most likely involves both biological and developmental factors. Some researchers believe an authoritarian or overprotective parenting style can lead to the development of dependent personality traits in people who are susceptible to the disorder.

How is dependent personality disorder diagnosed?

If symptoms are present, the doctor will begin an evaluation by performing a complete medical history and physical examination. Although there are no laboratory tests to specifically diagnose personality disorders, the doctor might use various diagnostic tests to rule out physical illness as the cause of the symptoms.

If the doctor finds no physical reason for the symptoms, he or she might refer the person to a psychiatrist or psychologist, health care professionals who are specially trained to diagnose and treat mental illnesses. Psychiatrists and psychologists use specially designed interview and assessment tools to evaluate a person for a personality disorder.

How is dependent personality disorder treated?

As is the case with many personality disorders, people with DPD generally do not seek treatment for the disorder itself. Rather, they might seek treatment when a problem in their lives—often resulting

from thinking or behavior related to the disorder—become overwhelming, and they are no longer able to cope. People with DPD are prone to developing depression or anxiety, and symptoms of these disorders might prompt the individual to seek help.

Psychotherapy (a type of counseling) is the main method of treatment for DPD. The goal of therapy is to help the person with DPD become more active and independent, and to learn to form healthy relationships. Short-term therapy with specific goals is preferred because long-term therapy can lead to dependence on the therapist. Specific strategies might include assertiveness training to help the person with DPD develop self-confidence.

The use of medication might be used to treat people with DPD who also suffer from depression or anxiety. However, medication therapy must be carefully monitored because the person might become dependent on or abuse the drugs.

What are the complications of dependent personality disorder?

People with dependent personality disorder are at risk for depression, anxiety disorders, and phobias, as well as substance abuse. They are also at risk for being abused because they are willing to do anything to maintain their relationships with their caregivers.

What is the outlook for people with dependent personality disorder?

With treatment, many people with DPD can experience some improvement in symptoms.

Can dependent personality disorder be prevented?

Although prevention of the disorder might not be possible, treatment can sometimes allow a person who is prone to this disorder learn more productive ways of dealing with situations.